

# **CULTURE**

# **SPEAK**

*Lester H. 1984*

## **SPECIAL EDITION**

In Memoriam: Sara Jane Campbell

February 3, 1959 - August 20, 1985

Sara Jane Campbell is dead.

She entered Doctor's Hospital in Manhattan on August 5, 1985, for major-but-routine surgery. The operation was uneventful. Sara was doing fine. She was going to come home on Sunday, August 12th.

At 5:30 in the morning on Saturday, August 11th, the phone rang. It was Sara's doctor. He needed to reach her parents. Now.

Because at 4:00 a.m. Sara Campbell, 26 years old, young, healthy, and with a brilliant future ahead of her as a writer, as a human being, had suffered a massive stroke. The right side of her body was paralyzed. She was unable to speak.

She was transferred to the neurological unit at Mount Sinai. When I arrived at the hospital, frantic and terrified, Sara set up a system of gestures and hand-movements that enabled her to express herself just fine, even without speech. She played a practical joke on me. I, always her straight man, fell for it. Sara made me do something I'd thought impossible under the circumstances -- laugh.

I thought -- I knew -- it was only a matter of time before Sara recovered. She was young. She was healthy. Dammit, she was Sara. She was my friend. We had plans.

CITYSPEAK was almost ready -- she'd just finished her novel, MEMORIES OF GREEN, for inclusion in the zine. CITYSPEAK was half laid-out; as soon as the last stories were in, it would be done. Then Sara and I were going to finish our LADYHAWKE novel. And we were going to collaborate on a novel set in our shared BLADERUNNER universe -- we planned to take it pro. We were going to travel. We had just finished redecorating our apartment --

This couldn't be happening. Not really. Not to someone I knew, someone I loved.

Tomorrow she'd be fine.

Between noon and one o'clock on August 11th, Sara started running a high fever. The paralysis spread.

The next day she was in a coma, on full life-support.

It was the day she was supposed to come home: August 12th.

She never came home.

On August 20, 1985, Sara Jane Campbell, aged 26, was taken off life-support in accordance with her own wishes and at her parents' request. Without machines forcing "life" to continue, her heart stopped. Her breathing stopped.

Sara was dead.

I am a writer. Words are my tools; I always thought they were poetic, eloquent, powerful. I prided myself on my ability to make them convey what I wished: actions, emotions, character. Life.

I was wrong. Words are empty things; words are useless. How can words on a page describe Sara to all of you who now will never meet her?

She was five-foot-ten. (She had a dimple that she hated.) She had short blonde hair. (She had prehensile toes.) She was a poet, an idealist. (She rescued a stray kitten and named her Zuul, after the refrigerator demon in GHOSTBUSTERS.) She was a writer. (She was a friend.)

She was my friend.

No, that's wrong again. These days the word 'friend' describes everyone from your co-worker to your dentist; a word overworked until it has lost all meaning. Sara was not my 'friend'. She was part of me.

And nowhere in all the words in the world are words that can tell you truly about this sister not of my blood. None to describe the loss--a loss not just of Sara, but of myself. None to describe the waste--or to help understand why a brave, brilliant young woman with so much to give was not allowed more time in which to give it.

It has taken me a long time to keep my last promise to Sara. In the hospital, while she was still conscious, I told her I would make sure CITYSPEAK was published.

Here is CITYSPEAK.

I hope you like it, Sara.

Anne Elizabeth Zeek  
August 1985/January 1988

## CITYSPEECH

CITYSPEAK: THE SPECIAL EDITION is the fanzine version of CITYSPEAK, Sara Campbell's BLADERUNNER letterzine. It is very much as Sara had left it the week she went into the hospital. It was my decision to leave it that way, and present CITYSPEAK more or less as Sara conceived it.

To bring CITYSPEAK to press, I contacted all the contributors from addresses in Sara's files to get final versions of their manuscripts. Some had major revisions. Some I never heard from. Some were unable to complete stories begun with Sara's editorial insight; perhaps someday their works will appear in other zines.

MEMORIES OF GREEN, the novel printed here, was finished on August 4, 1985, the day before Sara went into the hospital. The version you will read was typed by Sara, and printed out by Jean Stevenson from disks Sara left behind. MEMORIES OF GREEN is a work in progress. The manuscript cover was labeled "Second Draft" -- and Sara would probably pound us into the nearest word-processor if she knew we were printing it as is -- "unpolished" and without those small changes every author makes to the final draft. But the story is good enough to stand it; read it and see.

There will be no sequel to CITYSPEAK: THE SPECIAL EDITION. I have included the names and addresses (where I had them) of the zine's contributors at the end of the zine, and bios where they were provided. Please send your letters of comment directly to the contributors to let them know how much you enjoyed their work -- they will have no other way of knowing.

Thank you, contributors, for your support, and subscribers, for your patience. A very special 'thank you' goes to Jean Stevenson and Joyce Yasner. They printed out everything of CITYSPEAK that Sara had had on disk; without their assistance, the zine literally could not have been published.

I hope you will enjoy CITYSPEAK: THE SPECIAL EDITION. The mistakes, omissions, and errors are entirely mine.

The vision -- stories, poetry, articles, and art -- is Sara Campbell's.

eluki bes shahar  
January 1988

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"ELECTRIC DREAM"

Electric sheep, electric owl,  
Electric girl, a human howl  
Torn from a barely human soul  
Constrained in an electric role.

The diadems of neon call  
Let coca-angels prostrate fall  
Within the city's light-crowned well  
To drown in its electric hell.

Upend the foul electric bowl,  
Drain city-offal through its hole  
Flush down a living thing to prowl  
From out the cold electric bowel.

Expelled into a world of clay  
Electric night wanes into day  
Tear off the city's glowing cauldron  
To stand alone as son of all.

Barbara Tennison





Lybarger '88

## THE EDGE OF THE BLADE

Patricia D'Orazio

The Voight-Kampff machine lay on the table between them like a spider, like a scorpion, like a multi-limbed, breathing, dangerous being. Of course, the Vee-Kay device wasn't alive. It was just an illusion caused by the inhalation of the breather attachment. Rick Deckard knew that. He also knew that the slender, neatly dressed young man who sat on the other side of the table was not a human being. He looked like a human being, but that was an illusion too, or rather, a trick, like the way the apartment looked twice as big as it was because one wall was covered with mirror-blocks.

"Just a few more questions." Deckard smiled his professional smile, the one that made his face look harmless and bland, but could not quite disguise the alert tautness of his body. He rolled his riter slowly between his fingers, put it down and carefully placed his hand on his lap. With his other hand he adjusted the eye magnifier if the Vee-Kay. The eye mag showed involuntary dilation of the eye which indicated a positive emotional response to questions, something only a real human could supply.

"I was on my way out when you came. I have to be at work at nine. I'm going to be late. I keep telling you that this is a waste of time," insisted the young man. He had blond wavy hair and a finely chiseled face. "I was picked up by a street random checkpoint Vee-Kay team two days ago and I passed their test. This is all really a waste of . . . "

In mid-sentence the young man stood up and pulled a long thin rod from the inside of his jacket. Before the rod cleared the coat flap, Deckard's hand was inside his coat, hauling out his heavy duty service weapon from its shoulder holster. He'd aimed and fired before the replicant could bring the rod into firing position. The shot hit the replicant square in the chest, knocking it off its feet. A convulsive hand movement squeezed the rod trigger and sent a pellet thumping into the ceiling.

Deckard came around the table quickly, gun in a two-handed grip, wary of the weapon in the replicant's hand. Thrashing and groaning feebly, it let go of the pellet rod. Deckard swiftly kicked away the weapon and stood poised over the rep. It whimpered and looked up. It had very blue eyes. Its lips moved as if it were trying to say something. Deckard stared. *What would a rep have to say as it died?*

Then it was dead and it didn't matter anymore.

*Not dead, Deckard reminded himself angrily. Retired. Replicants don't die because they can't. They can't because they were never alive.*

Deckard looked down at his hands. They were starting to shake. Worse than the last time, he was sure. Each time it was getting worse. When he tried to put his gun away it took him three attempts to get the muzzle lined up properly with the holster because his hands were shaking so badly.

The replicant's eyes stared up at him. That bothered Deckard. He looked around the clean, tidy apartment to find something to cover up the replicant. He saw a coat on the sofa. He remembered the replicant had been about to go out when he had turned up at the door requesting a follow-up test to the one given at the Vee-Kay checkpoint.

Reaching for the coat, Deckard picked it up by the sleeve. Something jabbed into his finger. Attached to the coat by a plastic staple with a jagged edge was a tag. *Reliable Professional Cleaners* said the tag. Deckard looked at his own rumpled coat. It hadn't been to the cleaners since his wife had gone off-world, although sometimes he hung it off the balcony to air it out. Deckard looked at his finger where a drop of blood welled from the pin prick.

Deckard dropped the coat on the floor. He couldn't cover up the rep like it was a human body. When the street beat cops got here to clean up the mess they would think he was crazy. Treating a skin job like a real person. Deckard stared at his haggard face in the mirror wall. He was sure he hadn't looked that bad this morning when he'd left his apartment for work. Maybe he was going crazy.

\* \* \*

Deckard's apartment was not neat. It had been neat, once, long ago, when he and his wife had first moved into it, but that was many long years of neglect ago. His wife had fought the clutter for awhile, then gave up. Later she had given up on Deckard himself. She'd gone off-world to one of the colonies looking for a better life. Or, maybe, just a neater one.

It was getting near lunch time, but Deckard wasn't hungry. He searched through the dirty clothes and books and spare mechanical parts until he found a half-filled bottle of vodka. He didn't bother looking for a glass. It was a hopeless task.

Besides, his hands were shaking again and that made holding a glass difficult and drinking messy. Deckard took a gulp from the mouth of the bottle, swallowed and waited, as if expecting something magical to happen. It never did. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and carried the bottle to the couch. He stretched out on his back, wriggling against the cushions, settling in for a long afternoon and a longer night.

Deckard knew he was going to collect a good chunk of bounty money for the replicants he had found. He tried to think of something he could buy with the money. He remembered the old times, in the very beginning, when he'd first joined the Replicant Detection Squad. He would rush home all excited, and he and his wife would decide together what to do with the extra money. He remembered how happy they'd been when they had bought the piano. Now all he seemed to buy with his bounties were more and more additions for his home Esper unit so he could work more efficiently.

The vid-phone buzzed for attention. Bottle in hand, Deckard got up to answer it, wondering who it could be. He didn't know anyone who would be calling him. He snapped on the vidscreen and a face came into focus. It was Captain Bryant, head of the Rep Detection Unit. It was not a happy face.

"Deckard, get your butt over to headquarters," Bryant snarled, his moustache arching over his mouth as he twisted out the words.

"What's the matter? What . . ." Deckard stopped in mid-sentence because he was talking to a blank screen. He took another gulp of vodka, put down the bottle and began to hunt through the rubble for his coat. He swore the damned thing moved around by itself.

\* \* \*

Deckard slid his long body into a lumpy-cushioned chair in front of Bryant's desk. The chair was uncomfortable on purpose. Bryant always liked to remind people that their comfort, their positions, their lives were in his control. The dim lamp on the desk illuminated every wrinkle in Bryant's face as he glared at Deckard. Deckard looked back through narrowed hazel eyes. Something was very wrong.

"I read your report on the skin job you aired today, Deck."

Deckard tilted his head to one side. "I do something wrong, filling out the report?"

"No."

"Then what's the matter?"

"Damned if I know. All I know is that Section Leader is sending a special agent to investigate."

Deckard sat up straight. "Investigate what?"

"The skin job, I guess. How the hell should I know? I just know I don't like Upstairs snooping around my territory, and I don't like people who cause Upstairs to do that."

Deckard shrugged helplessly and tried to look innocent and inoffensive. He slumped back in the seat, futilely rearranged his rumpled coat and folded his hands on his lap. He stared down at his hands. His nails needed trimming. He suddenly remembered the replicant at the apartment had long, slender fingers, the nails neatly trimmed and buffed. Then he remembered the hand spasming convulsively when he kicked the rod out of its reach. And he remembered the blue eyes staring up at him. Deckard saw his own fingers begin to tremble again.

"Skin jobs take a lot out of you anymore, Deck."

Deckard looked up. Bryant was watching him, his eyes slits in his lined face. Deckard shifted uneasily in the lumpy seat.

"A rep is a rep."

"You'd better keep thinking that," Bryant advised, "or else you'll be falling off the edge of the blade and I wouldn't like that."

*Falling off the edge of the blade.* Deckard hated that expression. Those with fanciful and philosophical minds likened a Blade Runner to a person moving on the edge of a blade, a person who would one day fall off on one side or another. Deckard wasn't sure what the philosophers imagined to lie on either side, but he knew that for a Blade Runner a fall meant death. It was usually an ugly, messy death by violence, but sometimes it was a slow, lingering death in the high narc shops or the alki-alleys.

Bryant's vid-phone buzzed. Deckard picked at a rip in the upholstery of the chair arm while Bryant swore and argued with someone Deckard could not see or hear. He did hear Bryant snap off the phone and heave himself out of his chair with an explosive grunt.

"Upperhanding already! This damned Ripper is on the roof garage and wants me to go up there!"

Deckard, in the process of rising, froze. "What did you say?"

"I said the upperhanding has started already."

"No, you said 'Ripper'. They sent a *Ripper*!"

Suddenly there didn't seem to be enough air in the room to breathe. Deckard felt sweat break out on his forehead and run down through his short hair into his ear. He flicked his hand at it as he straightened. Blade Runner was the code name for replicant hunters. Yet there was another special hunter, coded even above the Blade Runner, the Ripper. No one knew exactly what a Ripper did, but Deckard had heard rumors that Rippers were supposed to hunt down renegade Blade Runners. He tried to think why they would send a Ripper to investigate him. Suddenly, an appalling thought crossed his mind, flaring up like the flames from a corporate smokestack high above the city.

"I didn't retire a human by mistake! I know I didn't! I gave that rep the Voight-Kampff test before I retired him. Besides, he tried to shoot me. Would a real person try to shoot me?"

"Did I say you retired a human? Did I? No, I didn't." Bryant put a heavy hand on Deckard's shoulder and steered him toward the office door. "Anyway, you know you're the best Vee-Kay man we have. If you say it was a rep, then it must have been a rep. Now, move along."

Deckard trudged out of the office and across the hall toward the elevators. His feet felt entirely too heavy. He was sure they hadn't been that heavy this morning. As they stopped in front of the elevators Deckard rubbed his fists against his eyes. He had nightmares about this, about retiring a human by mistake.

"The reactions were too slow," he muttered. "The questions were good. The reactions were too slow. I'm too sure."

"Sure, sure," Bryant soothed absently. An elevator gaped open before them. Bryant stepped inside and crooked a finger, beckoning for Deckard to follow.

Deckard eyed Bryant suspiciously as he pushed a button for the roof garage. "If I've done something wrong, really wrong, you'd warn me, wouldn't you?"

The elevator began to ascend. Bryant gave Deckard a benevolent smile. "Deck, you're the best Blade Runner I've got. You're the best I ever had. Better even than Dave Holden, and he's got a few years' experience on you. You got the instincts, you got the moves, you got the ol' Blade Runner magic. I wouldn't let you get away. I need you."

For some reason he did not understand, Deckard was not comforted by the smile or the speech. He responded with a twitch of his mouth and focused his eyes on the floor indicator panel where the flashing lights counted off the floors as they rose toward the roof -- and the Ripper.

\* \* \*

The rooftop garage was covered by a *High Dome* roof. Along the dome's raw metal ribs they had stretched illumis-trips which cast light in a striped pattern on the floor far below. Deckard saw a spinner shoot through the mouth of the garage, passing through light and shadow as it sank to its resting place. Outside it was raining as usual. The sound of the rain beating on the garage's arched roof could be heard clearly despite the sound baffles guaranteed to eliminate the noise. Deckard pulled his coat a little tighter as he trailed in Bryant's footsteps. Manufacturers were always promising things they couldn't deliver, like replicants who wouldn't run away or kill their masters or try to say something as they died. *Shut down*, Deckard corrected himself quickly. *Reps did not die, they shut down. They weren't killed, they were retired*. But was the young man with the wavy blond hair a replicant? Deckard shivered. The trembling had nothing to do with the dampness of the garage.

It used to be so easy. The old Prototype 400's, the Prometheus 17's, even the Nexus One's, with their flat, expressionless voices, their inability to respond to the unexpected. There was never any worry about making a mistake. You knew. You just knew. You didn't need the Voight-Kampff test or the spinal arc test. You just knew. But it was getting harder and harder. The reps were smoother, slicker, more human. Maybe too human? Maybe *all* human?

"Damned punkfaced of this special agent to expect me to come up here," Bryant complained as he stamped through puddles of water and lube fluid from the parked spinners. A few mechs glanced up then quickly buried themselves under their spinner hoods when they saw the expression on the Captain's face. He marched twoard the very edge of the roof hanger where the VIP parking was located. The only vehicle parked in the section was a large, super-custom spinner, black with silver markings. Deckard put his hands in his pockets and clenched his fists. He knew that it was no local car.

"Captain Bryant?"

The voice coming out of the shadows made Deckard turn very, very fast, showing the agility that made him a good cop. A figure stepped from the darkness into a stripe of light.

Deckard saw a woman in black, very tall, very thin, as if the flesh had been consumed from her bones. Everything about her, the line of her body, the tilt of her head said *Hunter*. Deckard felt a tightening in his chest and knew it was fear. It wasn't the fear the hunter feels when he is stalking dangerous prey. It was the fear of the hunted when he knows the eyes of the hunter are on him.

She moved toward them with lithe grace. She wore a one-piece black uniform with silver piping on the seams. She had a nonregulation thigh holster. She did have a regulation haircut, cropped short like Deckard's. However, her coffee-colored hair lay smooth and sleek against her head. Her skin was white, bloodless. The bones of her face stood out, raw and ugly. Her eyes were dark brown, deep-set, framed by thick brows. Deckard flinched as the eyes flickered over his body then snapped toward Bruant.

"Captain Bryant, I'm Ripper Three."

"I want to know what the hell is going on here!" Bryant bellowed. "All we know is that it had something to do with the skin job Deckard aired out this afternoon. It was a skin job, wasn't it?"

The Ripper turned her head slowly and looked at Deckard. Her eyes were cold, remote, detached. Deckard felt sweat trickling down his back. He tried to swallow, but couldn't. His mouth was too dry. Deckard clenched his fists so hard the untrimmed edges of his nails caught and tore his skin.

"Mr. Deckard, the results of the bone marrow test show the body was a Nexus Three unit on the bounty lists for Seven Sector. It was part of a shipment from Tyrell to the Dermion Colony that escaped while enroute to the spaceport."

Deckard's hands opened as his muscles went weak. The ends of his fingers felt numb. His lungs hurt. He sucked in a huge breath. He had not made a mistake. At least not this time.

"Then Deckard isn't in any trouble?" Bryant demanded loudly.

"No."

"Then what the hell are you doing here?"

Deckard pulled the lapels of his coat together and looked at the Ripper expectantly. *What the hell was she doing here anyway? What did she want?* Deckard knew what he wanted. He wanted to go home, get his half-filled bottle of vodka and finish it, then he wanted to sleep without dreaming for a long time.

"Twelve units escaped from the spaceport. Five have already been retired. The seven remaining units are now in this sector."

"No problem," Bryant grinned mirthlessly. "My Blade Runners will clean up the rest in no time at all."

"It is essential that I personally supervise the hunt for and retirement of the remaining units. This will be impossible if you follow standard procedure and parcel out the seven remaining units among your Blade Runners. I must ask you to assign all remaining units to a single Blade Runner with whom I shall work. I require the services of your best Vee-Kay man."

"Deckard," Bryant said without hesitation.

"Yes."

Deckard looked from Bryant's lined, calculating face to the Ripper's impassive one. Neither looked at him.

"When do you want him?"

"Immediately. I do not wish the Nexus units to be moved again." The Ripper nodded curtly toward Bryant. "Thank you for your cooperation, Captain. I shall return Mr. Deckard when I am through with him."

"In one piece," Bryant demanded. "He's valuable merchandise."

Bryant hunched his shoulders and strode away, leaving Deckard standing with the Ripper.

"Nobody asked me," Deckard mumbled.

If the Ripper heard him she gave no sign. She turned and moved with smooth sliding grace toward her spinner. Shrugging, Deckard followed. Seven more Nexus Three units, seven more sets of staring eyes, seven more mouths trying to say something to him. Deckard's feet did not feel any lighter. Maybe his shoes were waterlogged.

\* \* \*

Deckard grabbed a pile of dirty clothes off the ripplecloth couch and after a moment's frantic search located another place to stick them. He flashed the Ripper an apologetic smile. "Don't mind the mess. You want a drink or something?"

"No," said the Ripper. She sat down on the couch and gazed at Deckard's Esper unit which squatted on what had originally been a stylish coffee table.

"Best home Esper unit you can get. My last four bounties went into it." Deckard patted the top of the machine. The Ripper blinked, but said nothing. Deckard rubbed the back of his neck. She had not spoken more than four words running all the way from the police tower. He picked up some dirty breakfast dishes from the table and carried them into the kitchen. Finding an almost empty vodka bottle on the kitchen counter, Deckard rinsed out a glass and filled it. He watched the Ripper through the door of the kitchen alcove. There was something compelling about that pale, chiseled face and something frightening, too. *She wasn't bad-looking, Deckard thought, not at all.* She was a little too thin, but she had those incredible eyes. Deckard knew he was attracted to women with interesting eyes. His wife, for instance, or that young woman with emerald eyes who had been "into" Blade Runners, or the woman from the Animal Theft Squad who had been killed in the shootout with an animalnapper gang. *Eyes, he thought, and dark hair and maybe long legs — maybe.*

"You married?" Deckard asked as he came out of the kitchen, glass in hand.

"Not anymore. He took my daughter and went off-world."

"That's what my wife did." Deckard tilted his head to one side. "I guess it was over between us when she left. I mean it was three days before I realized she'd gone. Is that why you didn't go with them?"

"I was a Blade Runner."

Deckard frowned. It was true that off-world, where reps were legal there was no employment for Blade Runners, but that was no reason to leave someone you loved.

"Well, you could have quit."

"Blade Runners can't jump off the edge of the blade, Mr. Deckard, they can only fall."

Deckard made a face when he heard that hated expression. "Unhhh, listen, how do you want to work this? Am I your partner or back-up or what?"

"I merely wish to observe, Mr. Deckard. I shall, of course, assist you in an emergency, but otherwise please proceed as if you were on a typical assignment."

Deckard shifted his weight from one foot to the other. *Proceed as if it were a typical assignment, hunting seven replicants by himself with a special agent hovering around, staring at him with those great dark eyes.*

"You said twelve reps ran away on their way to a spaceport?"

"They overpowered their van driver and escaped. Tyrell Corporation said it was a freak flaw in their brain case construction."

Deckard sighed and sipped his vodka. Another manufacturer's excuse. He looked at the Ripper over the rim of his glass. "Is that why you're on the case? You usually get assigned when a bunch of them goes missing?"

"There was a serious dereliction of duty in the Seven Sector Replicant Detection Unit. I was assigned to the case to correct it."

Deckard took a gulp of his drink. He didn't like the sound of that.

"What happened?"

"The details do not pertain to your function in this case."

"And what is my function in this case?"

"To find and retire the remaining replicant units."

"Then I'd better start my prep work." Deckard set down his glass to clear a space on the couch in front of the Esper.

"Mr. Deckard, although some of the Seven Sector files will be available to you, those of Blade Runners Phillipon and Macavoy have been sealed to anyone under Level Twelve security clearance."

Deckard turned to stare at her. Level Twelve was very high. Bryant was cleared for Level Eight and Deckard, as a top Blade Runner, only to Level Five. He sat down in the space he had cleared, took a rather noisy gulp of his vodka, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and went to work.

According to the files to which Deckard had accessin a General Info Call-up, four of the missing replicants had been retired without incident by Seven Sector Blade Runners. Then the remainder had simply dropped out of sight and stayed out of sight for over two months, until 8:00 that morning when Deckard had retired the fifth unit. Deckard assumed that the abrupt disappearances, the sealed files of Macavoy and Phillipon and the Ripper's presence were all connected. He decided that he really didn't want to know what had happened.

Ident photos appeared one by one on the Esper screen. The first four had the word 'retired' printed over them. The fifth was the blond rep Deckard had retired that morning.

Deckard was glad that the face, the blue eyes and the black-printed 'retired' flashed off the screen quickly.

He took his time familiarizing himself with the seven remaining units. Three were pleasure units, two custom-made females — a Eurasian and a Nordic blonde type — and a male pleasure unit, a Tyrell "Muscle Beach Model", with curly red hair. The final four were military drones, almost identical, tall, broad-shouldered, powerfully built.

Two things about the replicants puzzled Deckard. The first thing was the fact that none of the reps were above C level mentality which, even in Tyrell's new Nexus Three edition, wasn't that high, especially in the area of initiative. He wondered how they had engineered a move *en masse* from Seven Sector without detection. The move also puzzled Deckard. The older type replicants, which worked strictly from logic, would have split up after the escape at the spaceport. This group had remained together. They seemed to be sticking together for mutual support. Deckard sighed and rubbed his eyes. He had noted that increasing sophistication made the replicants increasingly illogical. Almost as illogical as humans.

Whatever it was, their actions were a weakness and it was the mark of a good hunter to exploit a weakness in his prey. The replicant Deckard had retired at the Philana Garden Apartments had been calling himself Charles Ogden. Deckard had tied his Esper into the City Central Computer to ask for security checks on all residents of the Philana Garden Apartments and also on anyone working at the food distribution complex where Ogden had been employed.

After examining the last file, Deckard shut off the machine, sat back and rubbed his neck. The vodka sat untouched on the table. Deckard checked his watch and discovered he had been working for almost three hours. Startled, he looked toward the Ripper. She was sitting in exactly the same spot, staring at nothing in particular. If she hadn't blinked, Deckard would have thought she died while he was using the Esper. He cleared his throat to get her attention. She turned her head slowly toward him.

"A possibility, Caroline Wright, lives at the Philana Gardens where I . . . retired the rep today. She moved in two weeks ago. I don't know, there's just something . . . wrong. I want to go Vee-Kay her. Now, if it's all right."

"Speed is imperative," said the Ripper. "We must take them quickly. I do not wish them to be moved again."

Suddenly, she was up and striding toward the door. Deckard grabbed his coat, his Vee-Kay's carrying case and tore after her.

\* \* \*

At the Philana Gardens the Ripper commandeered the building superintendent to let her into Charles Ogden's apartment to inspect the premises. Deckard went up to see Ms. Caroline Wright alone.

Ms. Wright was a hostess at the Top of the Tower restaurant in the Falsing Tower. Although Deckard knew she had gotten off work at two, she apparently hadn't had time to change. She answered the door in her hostess uniform, a sapphire blue cling suit that hugged every inch of her tall shapely figure. She had dark hair, but her height and her features were wrong for the Eurasian-type replicant. However, Deckard could not discount the possibility that she was the other female. Dyed hair and makeup could change a lot in a woman.

"Official business," Deckard announced. Unable to see into the rest of the apartment he kept his right hand hovering near his gun. He set down his Vee-Kay to use his left hand to flash his badge at Ms. Wright. "Replicant Detection Unit."

"I don't understand." Ms. Wright's brow wrinkled above her crystal blue eyes. "What do you want with me?"

"There's been an illegal replicant apprehended in this area," Deckard explained as he pushed into the apartment. "It's standard procedure to run spot checks — Voight-Kampff tests. You must have heard of them."

Ms. Wright's face brightened. "Oh, you mean like the random street checkpoints? I took one of those tests. And passed, of course."

"Of course," Deckard smiled agreeably. The statement might have been a ploy or it might have been the truth, whether she was a replicant or not. Charles Ogden had also passed a Vee-Kay test given by an ordinary operator. However, a street beat cop using a Vee-Kay and a manual was not the same thing as a Blade Runner. Deckard let his smile brighten to match hers. "Then if you're familiar with the test you know that you have nothing to worry about."

The apartment was almost identical to the one where Deckard has shot Charles Ogden. The same plexiplas furniture, the same ripplecloth couch running along the mirror wall. He could see into the kitchen and the sleeping alcove, where a frilly spread was stretched unevenly over the bed. On top of the spread was one of those square plastic boxes they gave you at dry cleaners. It was partially open, revealing another cling suit, a spare hostess outfit. Satisfied she was alone in the apartment, Deckard picked up his Vee-Kay and carried it to a plexiplas table in the eating area.

"This will be fine. The chairs are lined up perfectly." He smiled at her reassuringly. "Just sit down, Ms. Wright."

She moved with a tantalizing sway of hips and slid into place. She watched with mild curiosity, but no sign of fear as Deckard set up the machine. Deckard sighed. He hoped he was wrong. The thought of ripping holes in that sleek form made him feel ill.

Deckard centered the eye mag on one blue eye and started asking questions. Ms. Wright seemed terribly amused by the test and laughed a lot. By the time Deckard had reached standard question twenty-seven, his voice had lost its amiability.

"In a magazine you come across a full-page color picture of a nude girl. The girl is lying on a large, beautiful bearskin rug. Your husband likes the picture. He wants to hang it in your bedroom."

"Do you hang pictures like that in your bedroom?"

"I'm the one asking the questions," Deckard snapped. She gave an enchanting giggle and tossed her head, pulling her eye out of line with the eye mag. Deckard readjusted it. He glared at the needles on the Vee-Kay gauges and bit his lower lip. There was something strange going on here.

Deckard had no doubt a street checkpoint operator would have already sent Ms. Wright on her way. Her verbal responses were in the high range and her reaction was excellent. However, her physiological responses -- eye, body chemistry, heart rate -- were in the lowest range for a nonempathic human. The discrepancy was difficult to notice though because Ms. Wright was using textbook methods of distracting the Vee-Kay operator. Of course there was no textbook, only Blade Runners who talked about the things that annoyed them.

"Have you ever been married to or involved with a Blade Runner?"

Deckard had not meant the question to be part of the test, but her reaction was enlightening. She stopped laughing and looked at him blankly for a moment, then abruptly gave him a dazzling smile. "No, but there's always a first time, if you're interested."

Deckard's stomach snarled up like a midtown traffic jam. She was a replicant. It had been the right answer, the perfect answer, but it had come too slow and the facial expression in between the question and the response had been wrong. If she had been a human woman taken back by his abrupt question, she would have looked puzzled. Mrs. Wright's beautiful face had been blank, inhumanly blank. It had only been for an instant, but it had been one instant too long. She tilted her head to one side, still smiling.

*Maybe I'm wrong,* Deckard thought desperately. *Maybe this once I'm wrong. Maybe the old Blade Runner magic has run out. Maybe... In the meantime, he had to do something.* He drew his gun smoothly and pointed it across the table.

"I'm arresting you for suspicion of being an illegal replicant," Deckard said as calmly as he could. "You have the right to go to Police Headquarters for a spinal arc or bone marrow test to verify your identity."

He offered this as a last hope that perhaps he was wrong, but he knew he wasn't. She had not screamed or protested. She hadn't even flinched when he drew the gun. She just sat looking at him.

"Get up . . . slowly."

Her long elegant hands gripped the edge of the table. Suddenly the table tilted and its edge slammed into Deckard's stomach. The force of the impact knocked him over backward. The next thing Deckard knew he was on the floor pinned between the table and his overturned chair.

The Voight-Kampff machine which had gone up in the awir when the table went over now landed square on Deckard's chest, knocking what little wind he had left out of him.

Struggling for breath, Deckard looked up and saw the replicant snatch up the Voight-Kampff machine. As he lifted it in a two-handed grip, Deckard realized she meant to smash it down on his head. Fear and adrenalin gave him the strength to twist out of the way. The sleeve of her cling suit brushed his ear as the machine slammed into the carpet. Deckard kicked the table out of his way, rolled over and got to his feet. She leaped at him, screaming. She had a piece of metal, part of the Vee-Kay, clutched in her hand like a knife. Deckard fired twice. At less than a foot the impact of the shot sent blood everywhere. Her body went over backward to fall twitching on the beige carpet. Gasping and shivering, Deckard watched as the sleek blue-clad form convulsed once then went still. Her dark hair spread out in a fan beneath her head. Beautiful tapering fingers rested against a curved cheek. She might have been sleeping if it hadn't been for the trickles of blood dripping out of the corner of her mouth and the two gaping holes in her torso.

Deckard turned away and came face-to-face with his reflection in the mirror block wall. He was covered in blood. His coat and jacket were drenched. There were purple circles under his eyes, hours-past five o'clock shadow on his jaw, since he'd forgotten to shave that morning and flecks of drying blood splattered over his forehead and nose. He tried to holster his gun, but his hands were trembling so badly he dropped it on the floor. He left it there. Deckard went to the bed and pulled off the frilly spread. As he yanked, the plastic box fell off the bed. The blue cling suit fell out and landed on his foot. Deckard noted there was blood on his shoes. It spolled the clean cling suit. He savagely kicked at the suit and the box, shoving them under the bed. He threw the bedspread over the body, then he went to the nearest piece of furniture, a metal desk, and began to ransack the drawers, looking for clues, for evidence, for a link to the other replicants.

\* \* \*

Deckard stood by the Ripper's spinner, watching the clean-up squad carry Caroline Wright's body into a waiting van. Deckard kept his hands in his pockets to hide their trembling and averted his face when he saw the other cops look at him. Deckard wanted a drink and he wanted a shower. He could feel the blood soaking into his shirt. It had dripped down his hands and was drying stickily between his fingers.

Deckard tried to think about the next step in the hunt but his mind kept going to staring eyes and bloodstained faces. He opened the spinner and got inside, sitting hunched in the cushioned, comfortable seat. Through the open spinner door, he saw the Ripper come out of the Philana Gardens, striding through the puddles. A uniformed officer trotted at her heels.

"Officer Gilfor, this is Mr. Deckard," said the Ripper as she reached the spinner. "He is the Blade Runner assigned to this case. There is no other. Allow no other person beside myself or Mr. Deckard to enter that apartment. It is under a Code Twelve security seal. If any other person attempts to enter the apartment, no matter what credentials he offers, have him detained. If he resists, kill him. Do you understand?"

Officer Gilfor, a wiry young black man, nodded firmly. Deckard thought he saw disdain in the brown eyes as Gilfor checked him out, but he was too tired to care. Gilfor saluted smartly and marched off.

"Mr. Deckard, are you sure you were not injured in the struggle with the replicant?" the Ripper inquired, looking down at him.

"I'm just tired." Deckard rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel the tremors in his hand against his neck muscles. "I didn't find anything of use in Caroline Wright's apartment except that grease stain you sent to the chem lab for analysis. It was weird. There wasn't anything -- no papers, no bills -- none of the little bits and pieces they like to keep around."

"I believe the replicant returned to the apartment and discovered the pleasure unit calling itself Ogden had been retired. It then removed any evidence from both apartments."

Deckard squinted up at the Ripper. "So she cleaned out her apartment and Ogden's and was about to run when I showed? Then she must have told the others!" Deckard sat up straighter. "I could use the Esper to tap into the Communications Computer and learn if she made any vid calls."

"We cannot be sure if it communicated with the others. Certainly not by private vid-phone. It would know we have the capacity to tap the Communications Computer. It would not remove evidence then leave so blatant a trace of its whereabouts."

"They did in Sector Seven," Deckard protested. "That's how the local Blade Runners caught two of them."

"They would not do so now."

Deckard shrugged. "Look, I don't know what else to do then, except run security checks on the people where she worked and hope something turns up." Deckard looked down at his hands, flexing his bloodstained fingers. "Maybe you want to ask Bryant for another Blade Runner?"

"I am satisfied with your progress, Mr. Deckard. You have taken two of them in less than twelve hours. You have moved with admirable speed."

"And lost the trail," Deckard said sourly.

"Not necessarily. You have taken two of the group and the others may not even be aware of it. They will be taken off guard for sure and make some rash move. A quarry that flees is easier to find than one which hides."

Deckard yawned and rubbed his eyes. It was hard to think straight. "First, I gotta go home and get cleaned up."

"Yes. I shall drop you off at your apartment," said the Ripper. She went around the spinner, got in and started up the turbines. The spinner lifted, revolving slowly as it ascended above the city rush hour traffic. "A few hours' rest would not be inappropriate, Mr. Deckard. I promised Captain Bryant I would return you in good condition."

"Sounds good to me," Deckard sat back, his head on the cushioned seat rest. The spinner cab was filled with the familiar chatter from the radio and the vox instruct devices giving altitude, distance of local traffic and other data.

"You know, there is something really strange about those reps -- about the Voight-Kampff, I mean. It's like they knew the answers . . . Oh, I'm going to have to requisition a new Vee-Kay. Mine . . ."

Deckard broke off, remembering the broken machine lying by the broken body. He tried to push away the thought and concentrated on watching the Ripper operate the spinner. Her hands were long and thin. They moved with crisp precise movements that were elegant in their economy. The red glow of the spinner's overhead light filled the cab. It lent color to the Ripper's white skin, making it seem warm and glowing. Deckard watched her lashes throw shadows on her high cheeks.

"What are you going to do after you drop me off?"

"Go back to Police Headquarters. I have been traveling since nine this morning when we first received word on the Nexus unit you retired. I should also rest. There are always a few bunks open in the barracks for the use of visiting officers."

Deckard knew about the bunks in the barracks. He had spent a few nights there when his wife had been mad at him back when he still cared when she got mad. The bunks were stacked up on top of each other like drawers. They were cold and lonely, like his apartment. Deckard stared at the Ripper's sharp profile, white against the darkness of the window. Impulsively, he said, "Don't go there. Come back to the apartment with me."

For a moment there was no sound by the chatter of the radio, then the Ripper said, "Yes."

\* \* \*

The plumbing in Deckard's shower was shot. He had been meaning to get it fixed when he got some money. As he watched the blood wash off, he realized he would have the money now. He had retired two replicants in one day. He would collect two bounties. There was a horrible irony to it all, killing replicants so he could fix the plumbing so he could wash away their blood better. He decided he needed a drink.

Deckard put on his robe and went out into the main room. The Ripper was sitting on the couch. She had found a box of crackers and a tin of cheese spread, probably the only edible things in Deckard's kitchen. She was making sandwiches and methodically piling them into a neat pyramid. Deckard was sure he made no sound, but the Ripper suddenly turned her head to stare at him. He gave her a weary smile and was met with the impassive, expressionless face.

"I thought you should eat something. I promised Bryant I would return you in good condition."

Deckard felt the tremor in his hands. "I need a drink."

He spotted the glass he'd left on the table earlier, picked it up and drank its contents. Root around, he discovered the half-full bottle he'd had that morning and brought it over to where the Ripper sat. As he filled his glass he asked, "You want a drink?"

"I don't drink."

Deckard cocked his head to one side. "A drink is the best thing for the shakes. Don't you get the shakes?"

"Not anymore."

Deckard took another sip of vodka and reached for the crackers. He munched his way methodically through the entire pyramid and discovered he felt a little better. The Ripper had said nothing while he ate. He'd almost forgotten she was there. Now he was painfully aware of her presence. He was so close he could feel the warmth radiating from her body. He knew what he wanted and it wasn't another drink.

Deckard reached out, cupped his palm against the Ripper's cheek. Her skin was soft and cool. She said nothing, just watched him, the dark eyes still remote and detached. Deckard moved his fingers back, over her jawline, past her ear into the soft tendrils of hair at the nape of her neck, still damp from the rain. He leaned forward and nuzzled her ear. He moved his lips along her cheek until he reached her mouth, then he kissed her, a long, searching kiss. She did not resist, but she did not respond either.

He tried again, this time the kiss was more hungry, more insistent. He unpeeled the velcro patches on her collar and slid his hand under the cloth, across her warm skin, over her collarbone and up her long throat. He pushed her back on the couch and kissed her again. Still she did not respond. Puzzled, Deckard pulled back, staring down at her.

"Is this what you want?"

"Yes."

\* \* \*

The shrill clamor of the vid-phone woke Deckard from a sound sleep. He climbed out of bed, clawed his way into his robe and lurched over to switch on the phone screen. Bryant's mustached face grinned at him, eying his bleary condition.

"Two in one day. Going for a record, Deckard? Heard you painted the walls with that last skin job. Had to go for the gutbuster shot, eh?"

Deckard rubbed a fist against his eyes. He thought of Caroline Wright's luxurious curves and remembered the blood on his clothes, his hands, his face. Bryant was saying anything he hadn't said a hundred times before, but today the conversation, the Blade Runner slang, the Rep Detect captain himself, disgusted Deckard.

The LED time display on the vid-phone read 2:00 A.M. Deckard scowled at Bryant. "You want something?"

"Is the Ripper there?"

Deckard sighed. "Yes."

Bryant grinned nastily. "Don't wake her. This is just a courtesy call, her being a special agent and all, to tell her that the grease analysis came back from the lab. I had it fed into your Esper. It's lube fluid used in very expensive cars. Only that skin job calling itself Wright, didn't have a car. Better fire up your turbines, Deck, and get moving if you want to score the rest of those bounties." Bryant leered at him. "But, then you must be tired. You scored a little extra tonight, didn't you?"

Deckard grimaced at the old vulgarity. "We'll be in touch," he said and snapped off the vid-phone.

When he went back to the bed, the Ripper was still sleeping, or at least her eyes were still closed. Deckard stood looking at her. It had hardly been a romantic interlude. Deckard had been too preoccupied with his own wants and needs to seek anything more than a swift and selfish release. The Ripper had not complained. In fact she had not said a word. Once she had sucked in a deep breath and released it in a long shuddering sigh, but aside from that, she had made no sound at all.

Deckard did not feel he was an emotional person, although his wife claimed that once, long ago, he had been. Still, he could remember, very dimly, making love with laughter and passion. The memories were grainy, like the old photos he kept on his piano, but they were still part of him. And he remembered the feeling of connection, of contact, of belonging. Last night there had been nothing like that, not even the fleeting illusion of it he felt in his casual relationships since his wife. There had been nothing. Even in union, they had somehow been separate.

Suddenly, the Ripper opened her eyes and looked at him. In their depths, Deckard saw no warmth, no greeting, no affection. He saw a cold, bare recognition of his existence, nothing more. Then she was up, gathering her uniform and moving toward the bathroom. A moment later he heard the water running.

Deckard rubbed his fist against his eyes and went into the kitchen. He made some coffee and looked around for something to eat. When he came out with two cups of the liquid and a box of only semi-stale nutribars on a tray, he saw the Ripper standing on the balcony. He set the tray down on the table by the Esper and joined her. Above the sky was a familiar dull red, the reflection of city lights on rain clouds. Far below, little flickers of light showed traffic moving at its most rapid pace of the day. Deckard cleared his throat to announce himself as he stepped through the glass doors, but she did not turn to look at him.

Deckard stood silently, watching her. She had a hand on the balcony rail. It was such a thin hand, nothing but skin stretched over bone. Yet, even in her thinness there was no vulnerability for Deckard knew that beneath the skin ran corded muscle. He had made no attempt to speak to her or touch her. She was only an arm's length away, yet seemed distant and unapproachable. There was about her the sense of taut alertness, of power restrained, of a huntress in abeyance. She turned her head slowly and peered at him in the grey light.

Deckard felt the tightening in his chest, the fear. He felt as if he were the hunted, not the hunter, as if he were her quarry, not the replicants. He had a very clear sense of the knife edge of the blade under his feet and his balance faltering.

"Bryant sent on the lab report," Deckard blurted. "I made coffee if you want it. I'm going to get dressed and start working again."

"Yes."

Deckard retreated quickly into the living room. He saw his coat draped on the ripplecloth couch and scowled at it. He was sure he had put it on the piano bench when he'd come into the apartment. Maybe the damn thing *did* move around by itself. It was certainly dirty enough. Deckard picked it up gingerly. It was stiff with dried blood. *Have to take this to the cleaners*, Deckard thought, *or maybe just put . . .*

Something snapped in Deckard's memory like a malfunctioning mechanical pet nipping at its owner's fingers.

*Cleaners? Something about a cleaners?*

"Son of a bitch!" Deckard dropped the coat on the floor and bolted for the Esper.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Deckard?"

Deckard flinched at the Ripper's voice. He looked up to see her standing in the balcony doorway. He shrugged and grimaced. "I don't know. Something . . . the old Blade Runner magic, like Bryant calls it . . . something about a cleaners."

Deckard switched on the Esper and punched in an Information Call-up on Reliable Professional Cleaners. "There was a tag in Ogden's coat this morning for a dry cleaners and later I saw the same name on a box in Caroline Wright's apartment. Maybe it doesn't mean anything, but maybe it does. She'd gotten rid of all the other evidence. Maybe she was getting rid of the damned box when I got there."

Deckard punched in the proper codes for a Computer Scan Security Search, asking for any employee of the Reliable Professional Cleaners who matched the physical description of the missing Nexus units. Faces began to appear. Deckard squinted at some thoughtfully, rejected others instantly. Finally, a strong, flat-featured face with straight, slicked back hair appeared on the screen.

"Got it." Deckard said softly and shut down the scan sequence. He looked around for the Ripper. She was sitting on the piano bench. She had her back to the keyboard and was staring into space again, eyes vacant. She reminded Deckard of one of them, but he knew she wasn't a replicant. They didn't bother to build replicants with pregnancy stretch marks.

Deckard coughed and raised his voice. "I found one of them." She turned toward him slowly. He waited until she had focused her eyes on him before continuing.

"Elmo Sargent. Works for the Reliable Professional Cleaners, matches the description of one of the missing units."

The Ripper stood and walked over to the couch. She leaned over the back, peered at the Esper screen, then said, "That is a Nexus Three military drone."

Deckard could feel the Ripper's breath on the back of his neck as she leaned forward. He felt the fear again. He looked at the face on the screen. What if he wasn't a replicant? What if it was just a coincidence? What if the old Blade Runner magic was wrong? What if Elmo Sargent had nothing to do with all this?

"Where is it now?"

Deckard gritted his teeth. *It. She had already decided Sargent was a replicant. She had already stripped him of his humanity.*

"He lives at the Richmond Hotel," Deckard said, stressing the pronoun. "According to the payroll comp, he works the night shift. He left work at the usual time. If he is one of them, why didn't they warn him to get out sooner?"

"It works in the delivery department," said the Ripper calmly. "If it were out on pick up calls all night there would be no way to contact it."

Deckard turned his head to look at her. He saw something new in the great, dark eyes, something dark and feral, something that bespoke the unleashing of the power Deckard had glimpsed in her earlier. The fear came back, squeezing his throat like a too-tight collar. It was suddenly very hard to breathe.

The Ripper wheeled and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"It went off shift at three. It was almost four now. The replicant might not have been able to get across town in the traffic," said the Ripper as she paused to snatch her raincape from a bookcase where she'd draped it. As she swept it around her shoulders, it swirled, shiny black beneath the pale face. "If we take the spinner we might get to the Richmond Hotel before it does."

By the time Deckard stood up, she was already in the hallway. He followed, moving slowly. He picked up his bloodstained coat and shrugged it on as he shut the door of the apartment behind him. The Ripper was at the elevator. She stood motionless, face upturned, watching the floor indicators above the doors. Yet there was something about her, a sense of motion, of power, of something dangerous. Deckard rubbed his hand against his ribcage and shuffled to her side.

\* \* \*

The spinner sliced through the rain as it descended toward the street level entrance of the Richmond Hotel. The Richmond was an old building, built on the edge of the waterfront section. It was no more than twenty stories high so newer buildings had been built over and around it. As Deckard squinted at it through the spinner's windshield, he thought it seemed to be squatting beneath giants, hunched like something in pain. Deckard shifted his eyes to the Ripper. Her face was rigid, pallid.

The spinner settled in a flooded street a short distance from the hotel. The Ripper hit the release button on the doors and they slid upward. She was out of the car, moving through the rain before Deckard could clamber out. He ran after her, splashing the puddles.

It was after four in the morning, around the time that the night shifts got out, so there were people in the streets. Deckard saw people who ordinarily wouldn't budge for a Metrokab sidestepping quickly out of the Ripper's path. As he passed them, he saw the fear flicker across their faces. They knew. They had seen it too.

The lobby was dark and shabby, decorated with relics that told of former elegance and present decay. The night clerk was a thin young man with a withered right arm that probably kept him from emigrating off-world to the better life, the one promised by the ad-blimps. Deckard flashed his badge and got the pass lock-plate from him, then joined the Ripper who was waiting by the elevators.

The trip up seemed to take a long time. Deckard had forgotten how slow the old conventional elevators were. He felt it would take forever to get to the fifteenth floor.

"It's four-twenty-two," announced the Ripper, checking a watch in the light of the elevator's sole illumistrip. "If the replicant left work at three, there is a possibility that it got here before us. Give me the pass plate."

Deckard fumbled in his pocket, then handed her the flat metal plate. He felt sweat dampen his forehead. "What if we're wrong? What if he's not a replicant? I don't have my Vee-Kay. I can't -- "

"You don't need the Vee-Kay. Only your gun. It is the replicant."

She took her gun from its holster. She was going in shooting. Deckard's lips felt dry. He licked them, but it didn't seem to help.

"Did . . . did you ever retire a human by mistake?"

"Not by mistake," said the Ripper as the elevator doors opened.

The halls of the Richmond Hotel were high-ceilinged and gloomy, lit only by the single service bulb near the elevators. As Deckard and the Ripper moved away from the light toward Room 1523, Deckard pulled open his coat and took out his service weapon. He could feel the tremors of his fingers against the cold metal.

The only sounds were the snoring of hotel residents and the occasional low murmur of a late night vid-broadcast. There was no light under the door of Room 1523. Deckard stared at the crack between the floor and the door, not knowing whether to be relieved or upset.

Holding her gun at ready, the Ripper used her other hand to put the lock-plate in the slot by the door. The locking mechanism, added on to the original door, hummed and buzzed, then gave a bleep of sequence completion. The Ripper pushed the door open and entered.

The place was old and smelled musty, but was quite spacious as such places went. Two long, meter-wide windows let in the glare of advertising scene-signs on the larger buildings outside. In the erratic flickers, Deckard glimpsed some chairs and a couch. The Ripper moved further into the room. Deckard crossed the threshold, stretched out his hand to grope for a light switch, then froze. Something, some small noise, shadow or change of air current warned him the room was not empty. The Ripper had halted too, peering across the room toward the windows.

An object flew through the air toward Deckard's head. He ducked with a Blade Runner's reflexes and still it brushed against the top of his head. He got the impression it was small and heavy and knew it would have smashed in his face if it had struck him. Trying to regain his balance, Deckard heard the harsh explosion of the Ripper's gun. A body fell, passing through a band of light from one of the windows. In the brief span the body was silhouetted against the light outside, Deckard saw that it no longer had a head. No regulation gun could have done that.

There was an animal roar from the darkness, then a chair was sailing through the air. It struck the Ripper broadside and she went down. Deckard fired wildly in the direction from which the chair had come.

His shot smashed the window, letting in the wind-whipped rain. Before he could fire a second time, a huge figure rose up from the shadows. It came toward Deckard at tremendous speed, an ability carefully crafted by the Tyrell Corporation into their Peerless Combat Soldiers. Deckard fired again and missed, then the replicant was right in front of him. Deckard saw an arm the size of a club swing at him. He felt a pain in his head and saw an interesting display of flashing lights that came from no ad-blimp he'd ever seen. The next thing Deckard saw was a huge foot, inches from his nose. He realized he had been knocked down. He didn't remember falling.

He saw his gun in his hand, although his fingers did not seem to register its existence. He tried to re-aim it, but the foot stomped down on his wrist, making him release the weapon. The foot kicked the gun out of his reach. Deckard remembered kicking the pellet rod from Ogden's hand that morning. Deckard looked up into the flat-featured face of the replicant and saw something there. He thought it might be hatred, but how could it be that? Replicants could not feel hatred, could they?

A hand that matched the foot for size reached down and grabbed Deckard by the throat and hoisted him to his feet. Deckard grabbed the hand with both of his and pulled, but there was not the least loosening of the massive fingers. The fingers tightened and blood roared in Decard's head like a subcab on a rail between his ears. Then above the roar, he heard a familiar sound, the bark of his service weapon. The replicant's body jerked. Deckard saw the spray of blood and instinctively shut his eyes. The fingers let go of his throat and let him fall. Deckard hit the ground with the hollow thud of floorboards, but no groan. Nothing came out of his throat. He sucked in air, ignoring the pain. The replicant, standing over him, turned slowly. Beyond his shoulder, Deckard saw the Ripper. She was holding his gun. He wondered what had happened to her own gun. Blood was pumping out of the drone's shoulders, but the Tyrell Corporation designed its soldiers to take more than one body hit. It turned completely and launched itself at her like the heat homers they used off-world.

The Ripper's face was as calm and remote as ever she fired three more shots. The drone's body recoiled at each impact, but he didn't stop. On the fourth shot, the gun clicked empty. The drone gave another inarticulate bellow. Still the Ripper's face did not change. The drone loomed over her, massive arms outstretched. At the last instant, she dropped into a crouch, grabbed one of his feet, and somehow, as if she'd given him a boost up, flung him into the air. He went over her shoulder in an arc and crashed into the broken window frame. Bouncing off the frame, he fell through the shattered window. He screamed. He continued screaming for a long time, then there was silence.

The Ripper darted smoothly toward the fallen chair, stopped, straightened with her own gun in hand and sprinted through the door into the adjoining bedroom. She returned a moment later, holstering her gun. Deckard had sprawled just where the replicant had dropped him. As he tried to organize his limbs into a more comfortable and more upright position, he heard sounds from outside the room that warned that hotel residents had been disturbed by the commotion.

The Ripper opened the door and put her head out into the corridor long enough to announce in a very clear, commanding voice that it was a police emergency and that anyone not remaining in their rooms would be subject to criminal charges. Since interfering in a police emergency brought a minimum sentence to two years in a penal colony, which was about two steps from hell, Deckard doubted if they'd see any curious bystanders.

He had managed to sit up. He wanted to stand, but his legs responded to his brain's commands with a few feeble twitches. As he watched the Ripper move toward the window, he remembered the chair hitting her. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. With an effort, he managed a hoarse whisper. "Are you all right?"

"I am still functioning, Mr. Deckard," she said as she leaned out of the shattered window frame and looked down. When she pulled her head back inside, water glistened on her face, lit by the garish neon signs across the street. "There is a crowd gathering below. I believe the replicant landed on some pedestrians."

Deckard's stomach lurched like a spinner with a stabilizer malfunction. A body that weight falling fifteen stories. There must be nothing left but smears. Deckard looked up at the Ripper. His eyes searched her face for some sign of emotion, any emotion: horror, disgust, pain, but there was nothing. Nothing at all.

The Ripper went back to the door and turned on the lights. She glanced down at Deckard as he sat blinking in the change of light. "If you have recovered your voice, please call this in to Captain Bryant."

She crossed the room, bent down by the headless corpse and began slowly going through its pockets. Deckard turned away. He tried to get up, but his legs still wouldn't obey him so he crawled on his hands and knees to the vid-phone which was perched on an old table. On his knees by the table, Deckard punched up Bryant's number, but his fingers were trembling so badly, it took him four tries before he got it correct.

The Rep Dect Captain's face, puffy and sour as ever, appeared after the second buzz. "Christ, you look like hell, Deck."

"Two." Deckard forced the word from his raw throat. "Two more. She blew one's head off and three the other one out of a window. Two of the military drones."

Bryant's mustache stretched into a strange shape as his face wrinkled in shock. "Two Tyrell Military Drones? By herself? What the hell were you doing?"

"Getting myself choked!"

"Sounds like you succeeded." Bryant said cheerfully. "I'll send a clean-up squad for the skin jobs."

"We'll need more than that. The damned rep she threw out the window fell on some pedestrians. It fell fifteen goddamn stories on some people."

"That's too bad. The department frowns on civilian deaths." Bryant rubbed a hand against his stubbly beard. "Shit, now I'll have to think of something to tell Upstairs."

"I'm sure those poor bastards are real sorry for inconveniencing you by getting squished!" Deckard yelled. His voice cracked painfully. He slapped down the shutoff switch. Bryant's startled face disappeared. Once it was gone Deckard could see his own reflection in the blank screen. The side of his face where the replicant had hit him was dark and swollen. There were splashes of blood on his face again. They looked like the Fun Dots the party girls put on their faces. He could see blotches amid the shadows around his coat collar. He knew if he looked closely he would see the marks of the replicant's fingers as it tried to squeeze the life out of him. Tried to murder him. Tried to avenge his friend?

Deckard rubbed both fists against his eyes. That was crazy. Replicants couldn't feel friendship. Or love. They couldn't feel anything. Then what had he seen in the eyes of the drone when it had been strangling him?

"Mr. Deckard, your service weapon?"

Deckard, still on his hands and knees by the vid-phone table, turned his head. The Ripper was kneeling by the headless corpse. She had some small object in one hand. The other was pointing toward his gun, lying on the hardwood floor where she had dropped it.

"I believe it needs to be reloaded, Mr. Deckard."

She got up and went to the nearest light to examine whatever she had found. Deckard grabbed the edge of the vid-phone table and hauled himself to his feet. He hurt. His throat hurt inside and out. He felt as if claws were digging into his stomach. His body was one long ache. Even the roots of his hair hurt. He wanted to go home and get drunk and stay drunk. Maybe forever.

He forced his legs to move across the room, gritted his teeth to lean over and pick up the gun. Fumbling, he took an extra clip from his pocket and tried to reload the weapon, but his fingers were shaking too badly. Annoyed, he concentrated fiercely until his whole world seemed to narrow to a circle of blurry vision containing his gun and his traitorously trembling fingers. Suddenly, a pair of thin, strong hands thrust into the circle and pulled the gun and clip from him. The Ripper's lean fingers pushed the clip home with a sharp snap. She put the gun back into Deckard's hand. He raised his eyes to her face.

She was smiling.

The gun dropped out of Deckard's fingers.

"I have him," said the Ripper.

Deckard stared at her. He tried to swallow, but couldn't. The fear was back, clawing at his lungs, his guts. It wasn't just the smile, the out-of-place stretch of lips over white teeth. It was something more.

The power he had glimpsed earlier, waiting below the surface for release, had been unleashed. He knew it, he could see it. Every instinct for self-preservation told him to run. And he knew why. The huntress was on the blood scent and closing fast. *But she's after the replicant*, Deckard thought desperately. *Why am I so afraid?*

The smile vanished, a mistaken muscular contraction. The lips returned to their former state and the dark eyes regarded him coolly. "Look at it."

Deckard forced himself to focus his eyes. The object she held was an advertising riter, decorated with the slogans and address of the *Bellyetta Garage* which specialized in repairing custom vehicles. Deckard's mind groped for some half-remembered bit of evidence, and after a moment of sluggish fumbling, got hold of it.

"The grease stain in Wright's apartment, the expensive lube fluid?"

The Ripper nodded.

Deckard squinted at her. "It . . . it's a long shot, what — "

"He sent another drone to warn the unit that called itself Elmo Sargent. The second drone was wearing mechanics' clothes and it had this. And I know he is there."

Now Deckard realized why he was afraid, why he had been afraid from the beginning. *He*. She never gave the replicants the dignity of a pronoun. Deckard knew she was not speaking about a replicant. He took a step away from her.

"You're not after the skin jobs, are you? You're after a Blade Runner. A Blade Runner, like me."

"I told you from the beginning, Mr. Deckard, that I was not interested in replicants. I am a Ripper Agent. This was a routine case involving four Blade Runners in Seven Sector who were sent to retire the Tyrell units. At some point during the assignment, Rep Detective Macavoy fell off the edge of the blade. He began to help the replicants escape. When another Blade Runner, Philipon, managed to track down and retire one of the reps, a pleasure unit, Caucasian school-girl type, Macavoy shot and badly injured him. Soon after, Macavoy engineered the flight of the remaining units from Seven Sector."

"That's how they managed to stay hidden so long without a trace," Deckard said. "That's why they knew the answers to the Vee-Kay questions, because Macavoy was prepping them. That's how they passed the other tests . . . "

"Until you ran a second, more precise test on the unit calling itself Ogden. As I told Captain Bryant, I was alerted immediately and came here to correct the situation."

"Correct the situation." Deckard echoed her words harshly. "What the hell does *that* mean?"

"Macavoy fell off the edge of the blade, Mr. Deckard," she said in the same calm, indifferent voice. "He became an embarrassment to the Department. That is my function. To remove such embarrassments."

"You're going to kill him?"

"Yes."

Deckard had heard rumors for years about such things, but had never believed, never wanted to believe. He remembered Bryant's eyes as he watched him in the office, the look on his face when he warned him about falling off the edge of the blade. Bryant knew. He knew about Rippers and he knew how close Deckard was to falling.

"Are you all right, Mr. Deckard?"

"What the hell do you care?!"

"I promised Captain Bryant that I would return you in good condition."

Deckard glared at her, realizing that there was no sympathy in the statement, no kindness in her voice. There never had been. He'd imagined it. Suddenly he was angry at her, at himself.

"I'm not a spinner you signed out!" Deckard raged. "I'm not an object or a piece of merchandise! I'm a human being!"

Deckard's voice broke. Pain ran up his throat with the angry words and stuck at the back of his mouth, just beyond his tonsils, just where he couldn't reach it to rub it with his tongue or soothe it with a swallow. It hurt too much to talk so he glared at her, feeling his face getting hot in the blood flush of his mute fury.

The Ripper bent, picked up his gun and put it into his hands. She closed his fingers around the cold metal.

"I know what you are, Mr. Deckard," she said softly. "You are a Blade Runner. Don't forget that, Mr. Deckard, not for a moment, because the moment you do forget, you're dead."

She walked past him toward the door. Deckard looked down at the gun in his hand, his fingers started to tremble again. The shakes. They were the first sign you were on the edge. Then came the vodka or the narcotics or the nightmares -- sometimes all three. Then came the fall. Then came -- what? The Ripper?

Deckard shoved the gun into his holster and went after her. He knew where she was going. And he knew he had to go with her. If he wanted to stay alive.

\* \* \*

The spinner pinwheeled through the driving rain as the Ripper brought it down on a street near the *Belyetta Garage*. It was an industrial area, traffic was sparse, pedestrians few. She landed the spinner in an empty parking lot some distance from their destination.

Deckard stared gloomily at a graphic on the dashboard computer screen. It showed the layout of the garage. There were two exits, the main door in front of the building and an adjoining door between the garage and a steel shop which had once been part of the garage before it was subdivided. Deckard knew he was expected to cover the adjoining door, to go in firing, to air out the remaining Nexus units. But he was tired, so tired. He had not spoken since they'd left the hotel and his throat was less raw, but the claws still scratched in his guts. He was nervous and jumpy, even watching the Ripper's long thin hands on the spinner controls unnerved him. He wanted a drink, he wanted a bottle. He wanted the rain to be vodka so he could just lift up his head and drink his fill, maybe drown himself in it.

The Ripper shut off the engine and suddenly leaned toward him. Startled, Deckard pressed back against his seat cushion. She reached past him to open a small compartment in the console. She removed a clear plastic case. Inside were two tiny vials of clear liquid and a pressure hypo.

Deckard watched as she carefully put one of the vials in the hypo, locking the dose in place. She held it out to him.

Deckard did not take it. Squinting at her suspiciously, he demanded, "What is it?"

"Life, Mr. Deckard, that one extra second of warning heightened senses will bring you, that strength you'll need when even adrenalin fails you."

"What is it?" Deckard repeated, staring now at the vial in the hypo.

"PHRS 234."

Deckard's eyes shifted to her face. "That's an illegal high narc."

"On the street, yes, but not for the Department. They are on the official use list. It is not illegal for special agents to use it in completion of their duty."

Duty. There were still four replicants left. Deckard stared at the hypo again. He was tired and sore beyond memory, beyond belief, beyond imagination. His hands, clenched into fists and hidden in his pockets, were still shaking. He thought about going up against the military drones in this condition. He thought about the edge of the blade. It was a long, long fall into the darkness and he didn't want to go.

Deckard shrugged out of his coat and rolled up his sleeve. The Ripper gave him the hypo, but he'd never used one before and held it awkwardly. His fingers were still trembling. She took it from him. He felt her fingers, cool against his skin as she traced down the flesh over his veins. The hypo made a strange little hiss when she pressed it down.

Deckard felt it immediately, swift and magical, like the feeling he'd always been waiting for with the vodka. More than relief from pain, it was strength, energy, power. He looked down at his hands. His fingers had stopped shaking. He felt alive, alert, heard every noise, saw clearly into every shadow. He felt the way he had long ago when he was first starting out.

The Ripper put the hypo back in the box.

"Isn't the other one for you?" Deckard asked, remembering the chair flying out of the darkness. "You must be pretty bruised from that chair. You must need it."

"Not anymore."

Then she was out of the spinner, moving fast through the rain, black cape fluttering behind her.

\* \* \*

The first floor of the building had once been a very large depot for industrial vehicles. It was now cut in half with both the steel shop and the *Belyetta Garage* inheriting one of the massive roll-up vehicle doors. The garage door was shut. There was a smaller door on that side, a door for people, cut into the larger vehicle door. The Ripper took a position there while Deckard went through the steel shop. The steel shop door had not been built with a secondary opening -- at least that's what the spinner comp had reported. Deckard couldn't tell for sure since the door was rolled up, leaving a wall-sized gap at the front of the building.

Deckard ran right in. He noted another door set into the stone wall at the side of the shop, but it was heavily locked, with a complicated new locking mechanism jutting out all around it. The roll-up door was the only exit.

The steel shop was a high-ceilinged place, with huge old-fashioned lights hanging from the roof struts. It was filled with large machines, piles of metal sheets and pipes, and a maze of shipping containers, piled in row after row of stacks, reaching almost to the roof and stamped in dozens of languages.

There were a few graveyard shift workers in the shop, maintenance workers, he supposed, checking the equipment. They were either on break or just bumming, because they were sitting around a table playing cards. However, his entrance, at top speed with gun held in a two-handed grip, attracted their attention away from their game. Four startled faces stared at him. None of the faces matched any of the replicant ident photos he had studied.

Wide eyes shifted from his gun to his bruised face to his bloodstained clothes, trying to figure out who he was and what he wanted. Deckard changed his grip on the gun, reached inside his pocket with his free hand and flashed his badge.

"Police emergency -- get out!"

If they had any ideas about protesting the sound of gunfire and shouts from the garage next door changed their minds. They overturned the table in their haste and stampeded past Deckard to the open vehicle door.

Just as Deckard started toward the door connecting the steel shop and the garage, it flew open. He fired. His shot hit a man in midchest, just as he crossed the threshold. He was young, good looking, curly-haired. He looked at Deckard with an expression of astonishment, then slid down the metal door jamb to the ground, leaving a smear of bright red blood behind.

*I made a mistake, Deckard thought despairingly. He wasn't one of them. He couldn't be one of them. Replicants don't feel surprise. They can't feel anything.*

Another figured rushed into the steel shop. His face was the same as the face Deckard had seen above him in the Richmond Hotel and his expression was the same too -- hatred, fury . . .

Deckard shifted his aim for the difference in height and fired. The military drone took the hit high in the right shoulder and kept coming. It was death coming at him and Deckard froze. For just a moment, just an instant, but it was enough. The replicant's heavy arms swung in an offensive blow preprogrammed into him by the Tyrell Corporation with a ferocity fueled by an emotion the corporation had never planned.

Deckard needed the extra second of life now from the narc and he got it. Flinching away from the killing blow with a speed even adrenalin could not push from his weary muscles, Deckard twisted his gun hand around and fired. The muzzle was pressed almost against the body. Even Tyrell engineering couldn't deal with that. The body came down heavily on top of him, knocking him to the dirty floor. Deckard heaved it off. There was blood and viscera everywhere. Deckard's stomach pinwheeled like a spinner as he struggled to his feet. He heard the sound of the Ripper's nonregulation gun from the garage. A small, slight form in black raced into the steel shop. Deckard had to take a moment to focus on the figure to make sure it wasn't the Ripper. He had a glimpse of a small, round face, delicate and beautiful, taut with fear. It was the last female replicant, the Eurasian who called herself Mara. Then she was gone, darting into the stack of crates.

Deckard knew she ws trying to get to the open roll-up door. Frantically he looked for the control, spotted the panel and ran over to shut the vehicle door. The massive metal portal slammed down, trapping the rep inside the shop. He thought about shooting the control panel, but decided against it, not knowing whether a short circuit would seal the door or open it again. He grabbed the slender control lever and wrencheded at it. The metal bent a little.

He applied more pressure. The metal snapped suddenly. The sharp edge slashed his palm and blood ran down his wrist.

Deckard raced into the garage. It was dark and silent. He moved from the doorway so he wouldn't be a silhouetted target in the light, although he doubted if the reps were armed. Macavoy might be, but so far the only weapon Deckard had heard had been the Ripper's and knowing her ability he thought they were warning shots to flush the replicants out of the darkened garage into the steel shop and into Deckard's line of fire.

Deckard heard a rumble and wheeled, firing a shot at whatever was coming at him out of the darkness. It kept coming and he jumped out of the way. It was a cart on wheels. Scrambling to his feet, Deckard saw two figures rush through the door, one broad and muscular, the other tall and thin. There were no gangly replicants on the missing list from Tyrell. That must be Macavoy, the Blade Runner.

"They're trying to get out the other door," the Ripper called from somewhere in the darkness.

"I already sealed it," Deckard yelled back.

He sprinted through the connecting door. As he dove through the opening, he was the last of the military drones, trying to manipulate the broken door control. Deckard fired, hitting the replicant in the back. It turned slowly, like the one in the hotel had done and stared at him with the same flat-featured face, the same angry eyes. But this one didn't charge. It lumbered to a stack of intricately cut metal plates. Without any visible effort, it picked up on and flung it clear across the steel shop. Deckard dropped flat. The metal sailed over his head, smashing into the wall behind him and gouging a hole through it.

Deckard knew the plate would have decapitated him if it had hit right. He fired at the drone and being a good shot, scored on three out of four hits on the stationary target. The drone, still on its feet, laughed. It laughed, then toppled over like the trees of Deckard's childhood. Deckard, getting to his knees, was aware of a harsh, rasping sound. It took him a moment to realize that it was his own breathing.

There were bodies splattered around the steel shop. The Ripper, gun in hand, stood in the connecting doorway, her eyes on the maze of stacked shipping containers. Deckard knew it was not over. There was still one replicant left, the female--and there was Macavoy.

The Ripper did not go near the stacks. It was too dangerous and there was no need. Reinforcements were on the way. All they had to do was wait. Macavoy would know that. He would know he had to make his move.

"I should have known Section Leader Colbin would send you," Macavoy called from somewhere in the stacks. "You're the best Ripper he has -- the best he ever had. He just as to point you at people and you kill -- like a gun -- without thinking, without feeling."

Deckard stood up, tense, looking for a target, but found none.

"Replicant Detective Macavoy, you failed to complete your assignment," the Ripper declared in a cold, impassive voice, "an offense punishable by a departmental reprimand."

There was a harsh laugh from the shadows of the maze. "A departmental reprimand -- you mean a death sentence."

"You were in violation of departmental regulations. You then shot and injured an enforcement officer in the completion of his appointed duty. This is a felony violation. You are also suspected of cohabitating with a female replicant -- "

"I love her!"

". . . which is also a felony violation," the Ripper continued, ignoring Macavoy's angry yell.

Deckard tightened the grip on his gun. He'd heard about such things. It wasn't uncommon off-world, where restraints were almost non-existent, but on Earth it was one of the last taboos.

"I don't understand," Deckard shouted into the crates. "How can you love a skin job? They're not human."

"She's warm and gentle and kind. And, she's alive. She feels. She feels things the way I used to -- raw and clear and sweet. I couldn't help loving her."

"It is not a human being," said the Ripper.

"Neither are you. Not anymore."

Deckard felt a chill run up his spine at Macavoy's use of those familiar words. He looked at the Ripper, but her expression had not changed.

"You used to be -- once," Macavoy continued. His voice seemed to be coming from another location. "I remember, in the beginning, when we were partners. When I loved you . . ."

Deckard watched the Ripper, but still her expression did not change. She was cold, impassive, indifferent, waiting for him to show himself. The huntress waiting for her prey, the gun waiting for the squeeze of the trigger.

"I fell off the edge of the blade," said Macavoy, "but you stayed up there, didn't you? I'm an embarrassment to the department now. I'm a dead man. But, what are you? Just a shell. What's left of the human being when the soul is burnt out?"

There was just silence in the steel shop. Deckard heard the wail of spinner sirens as the clean-up squad approached. He tensed, knowing Macavoy had to make his move soon.

There was the briefest warning, a scrape, then a pile of metal tubes collapsed as the chain fasteners holding them together were pulled away.

The pipes rolled toward Deckard like an avalanche. He jumped out of the way, behind a huge machine and heard the pipes clanging and crashing around him. He heard Macavoy's voice yelling to the girl to run.

Looking toward the connecting door, Deckard saw the replicant slip through into the garage. He saw Macavoy gallop across the open space between the crates and the door. He saw the Ripper standing in the middle of the aisle between the machines and the crates. She raised her arm, stretched it straight out and fired.

Macavoy's body arched in midstride. For a strange, sickening instant, Deckard could see into the garage through the hole blasted into Macavoy's body by the Ripper's weapon. The impact and momentum kept Macavoy going a few steps more, then he went down, sprawling, ugly and boneless, about a meter from the door.

The sound of the approaching spinners was louder. Deckard stood up. The narc had worn off and he was tired again. Or maybe the narc hadn't worn off. It just wasn't powerful enough to cope with Deckard's exhaustion. He started to move toward the Ripper when he saw a shadow flicker through the doorway, heard a voice.

"David!"

Deckard gawked in astonishment as the female replicant came back through the door. She looked at the body, then at the Ripper, then sat down beside Macavoy's corpse. Deckard stared at her face. There were tears running down her face. He hadn't thought replicants could cry. He couldn't believe she had come back. She could have gotten away. Why did she come back? An answer occurred to him, but he didn't want to think about it. It wasn't possible for a replicant to feel -- not hatred, not love. They weren't real. They weren't alive. It must be some kind of mistake, a flaw in the chemicals like the Corporation said.

Looking away in confusion, Deckard's eyes focused on the Ripper. She was not looking at the replicant. She was looking at him. He felt it again. The fear. And he knew why. He felt the edge of the blade beneath his feet, felt the cold of the long, long fall into the dark.

"You are the Blade Runner on the case, Mr. Deckard. It is your duty to finish it."

Deckard raised his gun and aimed it. The replicant didn't even look up. She began to weep out loud, rocking back and forth in her grief. Deckard couldn't keep his arm steady. It was trembling too badly.

"I can't." Deckard lowered the gun muzzle. "I can't shoot . . . not . . . not when she's doing . . . that. I can't."

The Ripper brought up her gun. It was aimed, not at the replicant, but at Deckard. "Failure to compete one's appointed assignment is a severe dereliction of duty, demanding a department reprimand."

Deckard's mouth went dry. The claws returned, tearing at his gut. He looked into the dark eyes. There was nothing there. No warmth, no regret, no humanity.

Nothing but the darkness, the darkness under the edge of the blade.

Deckard fired.

The replicant's slight body was thrown backward by the impact. As Deckard watched she twitched feebly, turned around and tried to reach Macavoy's hand. It was like some pathetic remake of an ancient tear-jerker movie. The fingers twitched one last time, missing their goal by several inches.

Deckard let the gun fall out of his hands. He hated it. He hated himself, but he didn't know why. It was just a skin job, just a collection of human cells and bits of mechanical things. It was a replicant. But replicants weren't supposed to cry. And Blade Runners weren't supposed to care. Caring could make you crazy, feeling could bring you to the edge of the blade. And you had to stay on the edge no matter what.

The Ripper walked up to him. She picked up his gun and put it into his hands. He let it fall to the floor again. It made a loud sound in the silence. He peered at her face, looking for something there, but there was nothing.

"You were partners once, weren't you -- you and Macavoy?" he asked. "And lovers, too. And you shot him. Don't you feel anything?"

"Not anymore."

The Ripper holstered her gun. "The clean-up squad will be here soon. Please, take charge of things. I have other duties . . ."

"I quit."

The Ripper who had half-turned away, now turned back. "You can't jump off the edge of the blade, Mr. Deckard, you can only fall."

Deckard wasn't sure about that. But he had seen the price for falling off the edge of the blade and he knew the price was staying on the edge too long. He was looking at it, at something that had once been a human being, but was now less human than the replicants she had once hunted.

"I'm getting out."

"What will you do?" asked the Ripper in a reasonable voice. "How will you support yourself?"

"I don't know," Deckard shrugged. The future seemed far away, unimportant, unreal compared to the urgency of his feelings now, his desire to escape. He wanted to get away from the skin jobs, the Rep Captains, the Rippers. He wanted to run as far and as fast as he could. "I . . . I have the bounty money coming to me. That'll keep me for a while. After that . . . I don't know. I'll drive a Metrokab. I'll pick up garbage. Anything but this."

"Bryant will not let you go."

"Bryant can go choke on a spinner," Deckard raged. "He doesn't own me! I'm not a thing! I'm a human being!"

"You're a Blade Runner," said the Ripper quietly, "and you're good. Bryant will not let you go. You are too valuable to him. Sooner or later, he'll find some way to force you to come back. And then you'll either be too slow and you'll get killed, or you'll be too soft and you'll fall off the edge of the blade--like Macavoy."

"And then I'll come hunting for you."

Deckard felt the tightening in his chest and knew it was fear. The fear of the hunted when he knows the eyes of the hunter are upon him. The Ripper turned and walked away. Stepping carefully over the bodies, she went through the door and was gone.

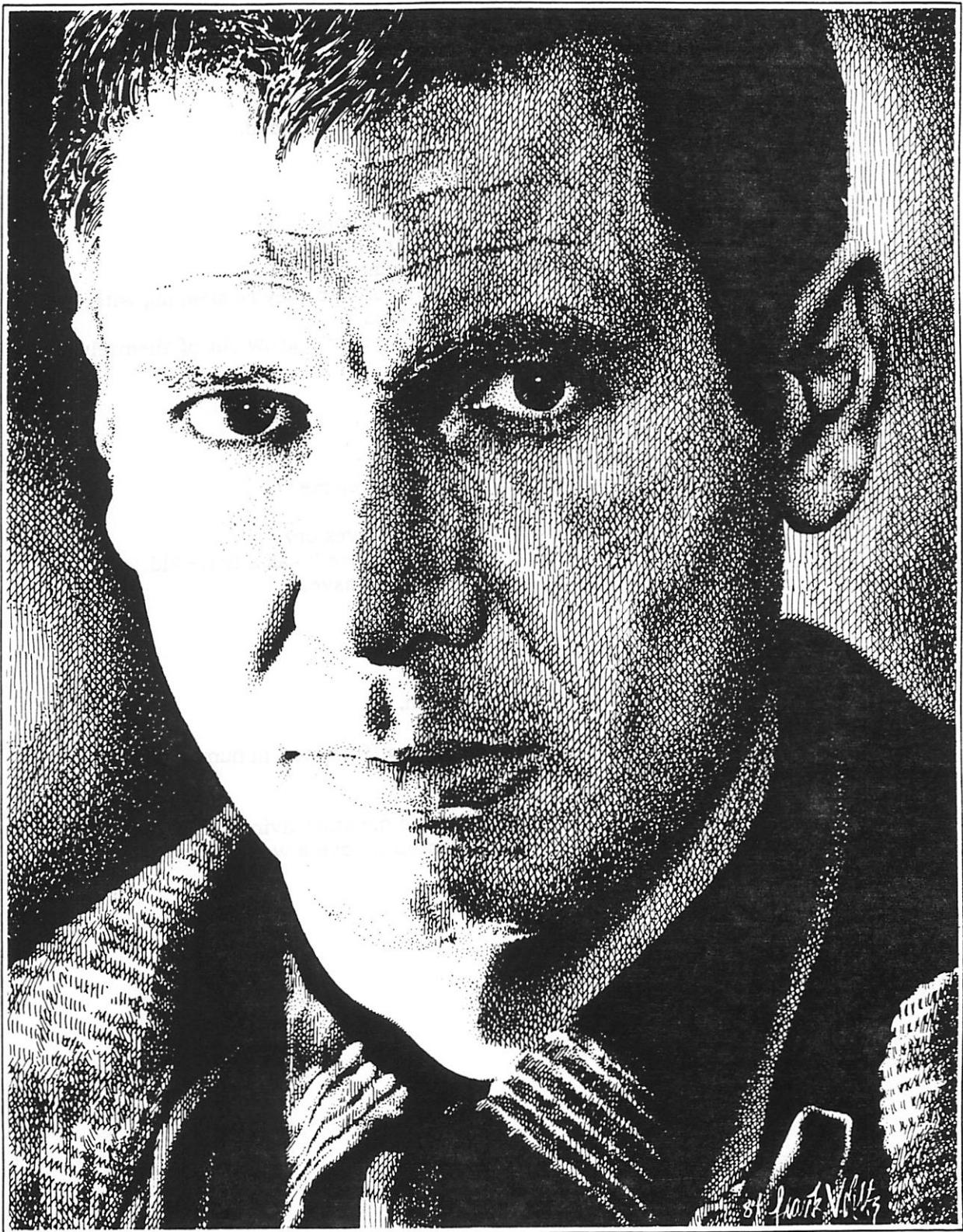
Deckard picked up his gun and put it back in his holster. The wail of the back-up team's spinner was very loud. Maybe she was right, maybe they were *all* right. Maybe there was no way to get off the edge of the blade once you got on it. But Deckard was going to try. He had to, if he wanted to stay alive.

\* \* \*

#### "LIES" / Madge Longhurst

When you rattled off those hundred and some questions with such indifference I was unnerved by someone so cold, someone who could shatter lives with one loaded sentence and still live with the memories.

But as I learned what I was I found that coldness saves you from insanity, and that sometimes it is easier to pretend, knowing all the while that you are running on borrowed time, but never acknowledging that self-destruction is as easy as murder.



"RACHAEL" / Madge Longhurst

I haven't wanted to kiss a woman so much  
since before Iran left me, and that was long before  
whatever we shared was gone.

But now something I thought dead has resurfaced,  
setting me on edge,  
making me feel like I'm moving too fast.

I know she's a replicant, but she's a woman too --  
more woman than these strippers and hookers  
who think a good time is doping up until they  
can't remember what their name is or who they're sleeping with.  
Being a cop you see a lot of their kind,  
and you always keep hoping someday they'll grow out of themselves  
and become innocent again,  
like Rachael.

She knows pain and fear and hatred  
just like the rest of us —  
the world hasn't been any better to her,  
but she still feels, and that's what scares me.

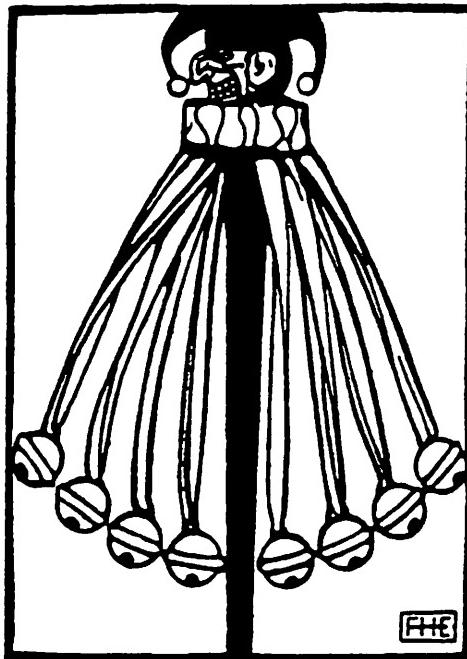
Her heart beats, her brain thinks, her eyes cry --  
when was the last time I cried? Not since I was a little kid,  
so she's been human a lot longer than I have,  
if you measure life in tears.

Life can be measured in smiles, too,  
and that's what I want to show her.  
I'm too old for falling in love again,  
but I can still smile, still feel --  
I know that somewhere under the indifference I'm human too,  
and desire is a beginning.

Can she possibly know she has made me start living again?  
I hope so, because I've never wanted to love a woman so much.

LAST LAUGH

Peggy Barilla



A cheap room, latest in a series of cheap rooms. She paced its length, as she had been doing for the last twenty minutes, ever since he had finally fallen asleep. Fourteen steps and then the window, the snow. It had never ceased to fascinate her, and for a while she was content to watch it fall, thick and wet and gray, all but obliterating the street below.

Slowly her attention shifted, and she became conscious once again of the room behind her, the silence pressing at her back. Small sounds struggled against it -- the low buzz of the heater, a filtered ghost of the wind, his cough and the rustlings as he stirred and settled -- but the silence was stronger. There was always something stronger; that was a lesson she had learned very quickly.

Her coat was thrown across a chair; she fumbled a cigarette from the pocket and lit it with trembling hands, smiling wryly. They had had to go somewhere, she supposed. He had gradually lost his shakes, if not his nightmares, along their tangled, overtraced road from Los Angeles. She was the one who had to worry now.

It would be all right again as soon as they reached St Lawrence Central. He had said so, and she trusted in his judgment. It would be all right -- not comfortable, but safe for another little while. It wasn't far, they could get there in a matter of hours, at most. But he had fallen ill, growing worse until they had had to stop in a place he'd said used to be called Detroit, and St Lawrence had been hours away for three days.

He coughed again, a congested rale that shook the bed with its violence. "Rachael?" Hoarse, unsure, barely audible.

"Here. I'm right here." Quickly stubbing out her cigarette, she went to him, smoothing a hand through his hair and bending to touch her lips gently to his forehead. It was hot, far too hot. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking into familiar hooded eyes, darkly shadowed now, luminous with fever and trying to focus on her.

He gestured vaguely, no more than a spasm of one hand. She reached the glass of water from the bedside table, lifting his head to help him drink. Lying back, breathing hard from the effort, he tried to smile.

"You've got to have a doctor."

He shook his head, wincing. "Can't...you know that."

"You can't stay like this, Deckard. It isn't getting any better, and I don't know what to do to help you."

"No!" The vehemence of it startled her. It was undercut by a renewed fit of coughing, but when she moved to get the water again, he gripped her hand. It hadn't much strength, but the brief, dangerous flare in his eyes was enough, and she stayed where she was until the spell subsided. "Fine...I'll be fine. Tomorrow we'll leave. All right?"

//He's trying to spare my feelings...There's a joke in that, somewhere...// "And then what? You're sick, you need a doctor."

"Too many questions. Maybe they would...want to check you, too... They'd find out..." Another hint of his tired smile. "And we couldn't afford it, anyway."

She bit back her reply, having to admit the truth of his argument. His cashcard had long been worse than useless; even if there were anything left to transact with it, it would be far too easily traced. Bartering, had they anything to barter, could be too suspicious, even as shabbily nondescript as they had become. She was willing to take the risk, if it would help him. But would it? He would find no more forgiveness than she would, if they were discovered. Even if his life weren't in jeopardy, how could she take everything he had done, everything he had left behind on her behalf, and negate it in a moment? Perhaps he hadn't thought

he was giving up anything worth keeping, perhaps it hadn't been entirely for her -- loving him, trusting him, didn't mean she had ever been capable of understanding him. It had never mattered, and certainly didn't matter now. The sting of futility had been another early lesson, one of the first any Six learned, even a sheltered one. She would not do that to him. 'I owe you one', he had said. They were even, but there was so much more by now... No, better to take it on herself, and let be. She wasn't sure why, but that didn't matter, either.

"All right, Deckard," she conceded. "Tomorrow." She stood, automatically straightening into poised composure.

"Beautiful..." He reached out to her.

She smiled her flickering smile, gave his hand a light squeeze. "It's in the warranty, remember?"

His low chuckled turned into another cough, not so severe this time. "See...better already..."

"You should eat something. We have enough for that, anyway."

"Just tired. You -- "

"I know, I have to be careful. You're a good teacher." She took a few steps toward the window. "It'll be easier later, I'll go then. You try to sleep."

"Wish...I had a drink..."

She hadn't heard that in a long while, but let it pass without comment. Being the cause of their delay was preying on him; rest would do more for him than anything she might say. She hoped.

Instead, she drifted back to the window, unconsciously hugging herself against the cold outside. The wind had heightened, and at this level the snow was whipped into frenzied arabesques. The lights beginning to come on in the buildings across the street bled fuzzily into the storm; infrequent traffic opaqued the swirling flakes into a solid gray wall with the flare of their running beacons. Cities and their machines never stopped; nature, however, could slow them to a crawl. It slowed everything, eventually.

The room's lighting coming up made her jump. Almost simultaneously she realized how complete the silence had become, a singing in her ears. Strong. She turned, found him watching her. Slowly she approached the bed. "Deckard? I -- "

Looking at her, through her, far beyond her... For a long while she gazed down at him, her mind walking around the edges of what confronted her. She caressed his lined face, his shaggy hair

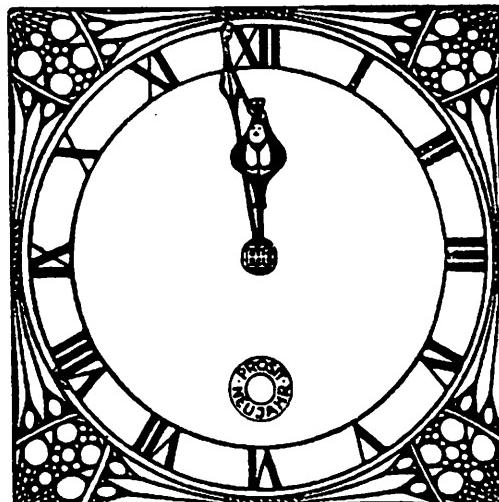
-- so white! -- and gently closed his eyes. They had held even less life when she had first seen them, over thirty years ago... Once again she bent to kiss his forehead. Not hot now, not at all.

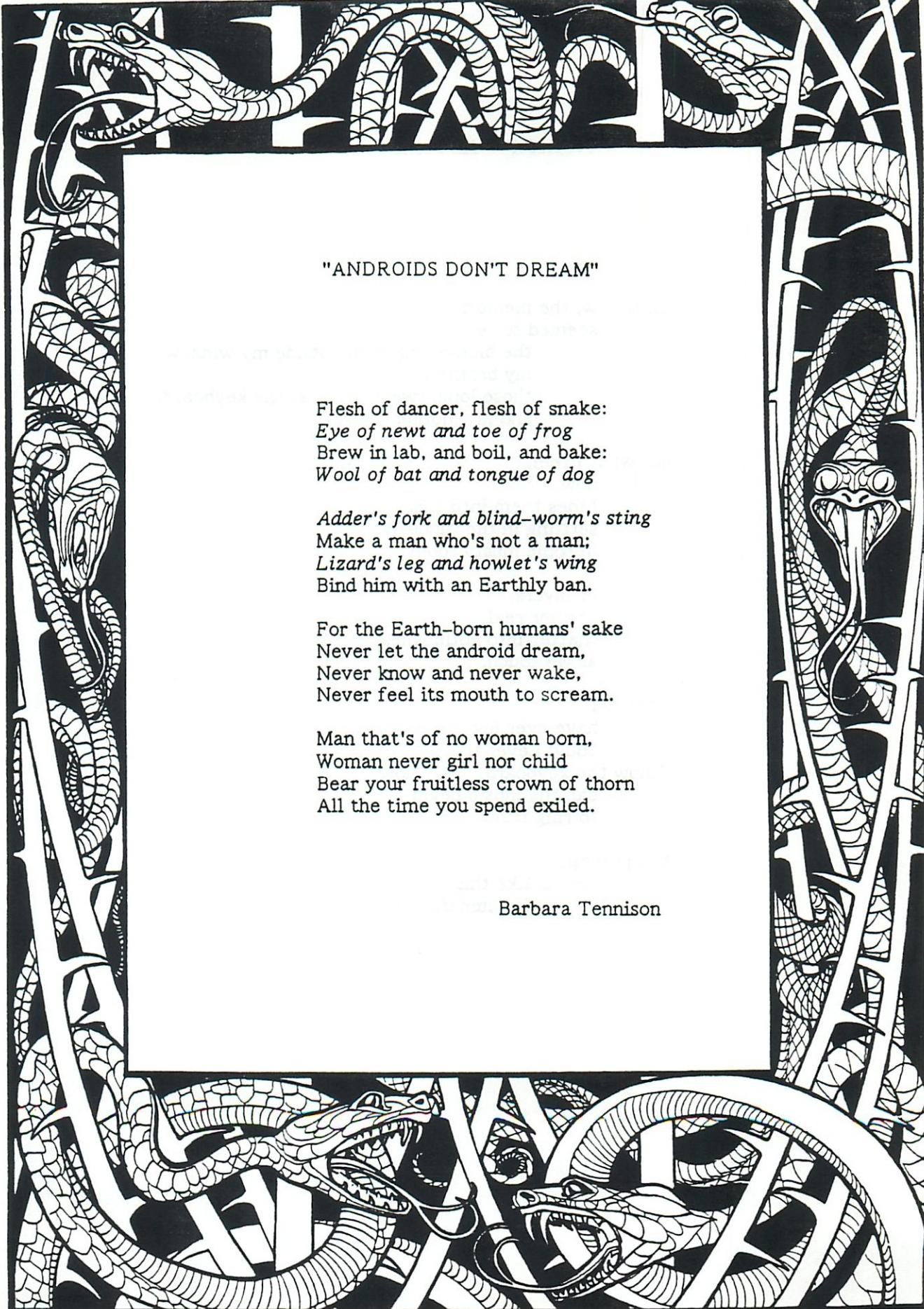
She straightened, calm. They had been over it before; methodically she set about what he had asked her to do. The access card for the car -- she knew the startup code, it wouldn't hurt her; the remaining valuables; the gun. There was nothing else.

She paused at the door, looked back at him, at the room. Her eye caught her reflection in the black rectangle of the window: slim figure, perfect oval face, raven hair.

Tyrell, she was sure, would have appreciated the joke.

\* \* \*





## "ANDROIDS DON'T DREAM"

Flesh of dancer, flesh of snake:  
*Eye of newt and toe of frog*  
Brew in lab, and boil, and bake:  
*Wool of bat and tongue of dog*

*Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting*  
Make a man who's not a man;  
*Lizard's leg and howlet's wing*  
Bind him with an Earthly ban.

For the Earth-born humans' sake  
Never let the android dream,  
Never know and never wake,  
Never feel its mouth to scream.

Man that's of no woman born,  
Woman never girl nor child  
Bear your fruitless crown of thorn  
All the time you spend exiled.

Barbara Tennison

"FOR RICK" / Jill Stone

Until now, the memories

seemed so real:

the blossoming bush outside my window,  
my brother,  
those long, sweet hours at the keyboard,  
and my mother's love.

But what I feel,

now,

fades them into dust  
settling in the sunbeams  
in some musty room.

Two other lovers,

neither real,  
shatter into nothingness  
as we touch.

Only you

have ever loved me. Only you  
could I ever trust.

I know the keyboard. Only now

can the music begin  
to ring true.

And perhaps

love is like this  
for humans, too.



The young man in this portrait was the son of a woman who was the first of the Society members to die from AIDS. He died in 1987 at the age of 21. He was a very kind and gentle person who had many friends and family members.

He will be missed by all the people he touched. His memory is the most treasured gift of all to his family and friends. Memories will never, ever be forgotten.



Sara '83

# • VOYAGER •

*anne·elizabeth·zeek*  
  &  
*pat·nussman*



And how am I to face the odds,  
Of man's bedevilment and God's?  
I, a stranger and afraid  
In a world I never made.

—A.E. Housman,  
"Eight O'Clock"

He ignored the water lapping about his feet, ignored it as he had ignored the steady drizzle of rainfall and the chill that was more than bone-deep. His weapon, unpowered now, still lay fifty paces back where he had dropped it. His hands, his murderer's hands, rested in his lap, lightly clasped. His thoughts circled wearily, mechanically.

The water crept past his insteps, soaking the lower part of his trouser legs. The boulder he was sitting on was fast becoming an island. Not even sure why — his life, his hope for happiness, lay at the edge of the strand, killed by his hand — he pushed himself up. He inhaled deeply. The taste of the sea was no saltier on his lips than his tears had been.

Finally he turned, and trudged back along the gently sloping beach to the edge of the shoreline. Stooping, he retrieved his weapon. The gun glowed back to life the moment he hefted it in his hands. Strong hands, deft hands. Murderer's hands.

He walked back to the small, slight shape that scarcely made an impression in the sand. He looked down at her. His latest — his last? — victim. Memories, bittersweet, sweetly bitter, flooded back.

They had escaped the city, and the future beckoned to them brightly. Even here, this far north of the Los Angeles/San Francisco complex, pollution smeared the landscape; the vegetation was malformed, stunted. Yet in contrast to the everpresent rain and the yellow smog of the city, the countryside had seemed -- to their wondering eyes, at least -- a verdant paradise.

Their plans were nebulous, unformed. They would go where whim, or the prevailing winds, would take them. There were other cities. There were also rumors -- unfounded, scoffed at by almost everyone in authority -- of people who had returned to the earth, people who had left the sprawling hellholes that were Earth's megalopolises and had gone, not to the robot-run farming combines, but to the wilds.

There were also the spaceports. If a shuttle could be hijacked to Earth, why couldn't they take one and go -- Up There?

The important thing was, that afternoon so long, so short a time ago, they had had options. They had had choices that could be made.

And then she had made the choice he never expected, the choice that left him standing here, looking down at her, his tears lost in rain and sea spray. She opted for death.

\*

Threatening clouds loomed from the west, but the rain had not yet reached this lonely stretch of beach at the end of the scrub forest. Hand in hand, like children released from school, they explored the wonders of both worlds, forest and shore. City-born and -bred, they had -- neither of them -- any memories of such places.

She plucked a handful of leaves, held them in front of her as though they were an old-fashioned bride's bouquet. The leaves were brown and ragged from disease, not at all the golden and red glories legend said they had been during autumns past, but her smile above them made them more beautiful in his eyes than even the telling of now-gone roses or dahlias or lilies.

As though she knew what he was thinking, her smile grew into laughter, and she whirled about that he might see her. She had shed her synthafur coat, had tossed aside her stiffly severe suit jacket. Silk blouse and skirt, pearly opalescent in the slanting afternoon rays of the so-seldom seen sun, clung to her well-remembered body, and her hair, still unconfined, floated about her head.

She was a faerie child, wild and free.

Her laughter died, and she halted her dance. Sombre now, she buried her face in the mock-bouquet in her hands.

"Rachael?" Hand outstretched, he stepped toward her.

Lifting her head, she smiled at him. Unshed tears shone in her

eyes. She straightened and walked toward him, head held high, as though a crown graced it.

Reaching him, she held out her hand to him. He took it into his. His thumb automatically searched for her pulse and, finding it, caressed it.

Holding his eyes with hers, she said, "I, Rachael, take thee, Richard, to be my lawful husband. To have and to hold from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, so long as we both shall live."

Shock held him silent. Rachael's pulse quickened beneath his thumb. She started to pull away, to turn aside, and he drew her back to him.

He raised her hand to his lips, kissed it. "I, Richard, take thee, Rachael, to be my lawful wife. To have and to hold from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, so long as we both shall live."

The leaves fell unnoticed to the ground as he drew her into his arms and kissed her gently. They consummated their marriage there, where the shore met the land, and slept after, locked in each other's arms, the synthafur coat cushioning them from rock and sand.

He woke to find his head cradled on her lap. One of her hands caressed his face; the other held his gun in a most competent grasp. The suspicions of a lifetime rose to the surface and he rolled off the coat and away from her, pushing into a defensive crouch.

"Rachael?"

She seemed startled by his sudden movement. Looking down at the gun, she said only, "Oh!", then handed the weapon over to him butt first.

He stared from gun to woman, then shrugged. In her own good time she would explain what had been going through her mind. Setting the weapon aside, he got to his feet and pulled her up.

He cupped her face with his hands. "Happy?"

She nodded. "Dangerously so."

"Dangerously?"

"Such happiness can't last."

He held her fiercely, protectively. "Don't be a pessimist, Rachael. That's in the marriage contract."

Pulling away from him, she stared into his face. "What is?"

He kissed her brow, the tip of her nose, the pulse point of her neck. "Eternal happiness." His lips met hers, and the kiss was a promise of eternal fealty.

They stood locked in a close embrace for several long moments. Then the wind from off the ocean, bearing with it the chill dampness of an incoming fog or rainfall, finally reminded him that they were still naked. A distant thrumming he took to mean the storm was coming closer.

He pushed her away. "No more of this. We have miles to go yet. Let's get dressed."

Rachael nodded.

They'd jumbled their clothes into one pile and it took much laughter before they sorted everything properly. Slowly, almost reluctantly, they got dressed then. It was, he felt, almost as though they were putting on their city identities once more, and every piece of clothing, every accessory, made those identities so much more inevitable.

His belt and gun holster were the last items to be donned. Looking at them with distaste, he almost hurled them from him. If he didn't think he might need the gun for protection, he would leave it here. It had cause too many deaths, too many nightmares.

He buckled on the belt and holster, then reached for the gun. As his hands closed over the weapon, Rachael reached for him.

"Do you love me?"

He straightened. They stood closely touching, both holding the gun lightly. "I love you," he answered.

Standing on her toes, she pressed a kiss to his lips. "And do you trust me?" she whispered.

Almost, he could not hear her, her voice was so low.

"I trust you," he said.

"Remember that, Deckard," she said. "And remember that this has been the happiest day in my memory." She kissed him again, and even as their lips met her fingers tightened on the trigger.

The bullet tore through her. She jerked spasmodically, and he could smell the harsh copper stench of sudden death as her blood drenched his sweater.

He stared down at her face. It was still now, and peaceful. He picked her up, laid her on top of the synthetic fur coat. Their marriage bed. Her shroud.

Hopelessly, knowing how useless were the gestures, he stroked her face, took her chin in his hand and shook her head. "Rachael?" he pleaded, looking for a sign of life -- a movement, a breath, anything.

If it weren't for the hole through her torso -- like Pris, he thought -- he might think she were asleep. He bent, sought her lips once more. Already they were cold to the touch.

Tears burned his cheeks.

Straightening, he walked aimlessly to the water's edge. Somewhere on the way he dropped his gun. He sat, mind numb, remembering nothing, and looked at the ocean...

\*

And still he did not know why she had chosen death. She knew her end might be years in the future, knew he loved her. People had lived with less than that to give them strength. Why couldn't she?

The muffled snarl of an airborne spinner sounded then, half-rousing him from his memories. He holstered the gun, waited patiently. It did not matter any more what they did to him.

The rain, as though brought from the city by the spinner, fell heavily now, and the chill was deeper. Although he had thought himself once more beyond feeling, he shrugged deeper into his sweater, seeking warmth.

It was cold. As cold as Bryant's heart, he thought.

As though his thoughts conjured up the man, he heard the hated voice behind him. "Told you you could learn from this one, Gaff. There she is, the last skin-job, laid out all nice and quiet for us."

Thunder roared in his ears, and it was a moment before he realized the sound he heard was the blood coursing through his veins and not an outer storm. His hands clenched and he fought the urge to yank his gun from its holster, to spin and fire on the Blade Runners behind him.

Heavy feet crunched sand and gravel underfoot, and a hearty slap on the back nearly sent him sprawling. "Damn, Deckard, you're still Number One, still Mr. Nightime. When I heard you were headin' north with Tyrell's demo model I thought you'd gone bad. Either that, or been caught yourself. Shoulda known better, though. What'd ya do, catch her off-guard?"

Still Mr. Nightime? Then -- Deckard stared down at Rachael's calm face. Understanding grew. She had heard the spinner's approach and had taken the only way she knew to protect him.

Three times now, his life had been saved by a replicant. Twice by Rachael, once by Roy Batty. He could not, would not, place

Rachael's sacrifice and Batty's freely offered gift at naught just to strike out in anger at Bryant.

Wiping his hand across his face, Deckard turned to Bryant and Gaff. "You got it, Bryant," he said.

Bryant glanced at Rachael's body. "You'll get a double bonus for this, Deckard. See if you don't. That's, what, five in two days? Almost as good as the time you wiped out the entire Slaughterhouse bunch."

Deckard shoved his hands into his pants pocket. "Yeah, if you say so." One of his hands encountered a small silver-foil pellet, crumpled now past recognition. The unicorn. Gaff's calling card. Yet now the man was here with Bryant. Didn't make sense. But then, what did? "And that reminds me. How come Mr. Charm here's been following me all over?"

Bryant's eyes slid away from Deckard's. "Following you?"

"You heard me. He's always just a step or two behind me. Why, Bryant? If I'm so god-fucking-damned good, why's he catbelling me?"

Bryant's eyes shifted again. I told you, Deck, he's learning the business from you."

Deckard flicked a quick glance at Gaff. Yeah, sure. And I'm the Director of New Cathay. The other Blade Runner was not looking at him. All his concentration was on the rapid pattern of his agile fingers as he fashioned yet another origami figure from bright red paper.

Narrowing his eyes, Deckard tried to make out what the design was this time. A long-necked bird with a graceful, trailing tail. A cockatrice? Or a phoenix, maybe? Was the other Runner into the classics?

Deckard rolled the silver-foil pellet in his pocket between his fingers. He knew enough classical history to have read the warning Gaff had left him with the unicorn. Was this new figure to be another warning? And if so, on whom? Gaff's face gave nothing away.

Deckard looked back at Bryant, caught the other staring at him with a cautious expression on his porcine face. Something was going on. It might have to do with the replicants, with himself, with the entire Blade Runner squad. And if he were going to make Rachael's death, Batty's death, count for anything, he needed all the information he could garner. So let him just catch Bryant and Gaff off-guard...

"Yeah, well, I hope he learned all he can, 'cause I want him off my back." Deckard turned, started back toward the vehicles. Gaff had landed the police spinner next to his groundcar. "See you in the city, Bryant," he snarled over his shoulder.

"Make sure you do, Deck," Bryant's harsh voice followed him, "we got unfinished business to settle."

For all of two seconds, Deckard wondered what Bryant's "unfinished business" could be. The rest of the long trip back to the city, the trip he had thought never to make again, was spent in thoughts of Rachael, and of the four replicants he had just "retired".

Was it something wrong with him, that he could view them as human? He thought of Bryant, who owned a prize-winning hog, and whose only concern for the animal was that it was organic, rare and expensive, the same attitude he would have toward a replicant if he owned one; Bryant, who never thought beyond the "skinjobs'" outer shell to wonder if replicants had thoughts, feelings, emotions of their own, who never wondered if replicants could dream. He thought of Gaff, whose face never changed, who watched life and death alike with the same passive acceptance, the same amused distancing of self; if there were something underneath, how deeply buried was it, how much would be necessary to disinter even one true feeling?

Then he thought of Zhora, who had loved life so much it had taken five bullets to bring her down. Of Pris, whose slender body had almost been torn apart by her anger when, in spite of all, she had felt life draining from her.

Of Rachael and Roy, who so loved life, they gave it back to him.

"More human than human," Tyrell had said facetiously, not realizing in his arrogance that his advertising slogan was true. More human than humans.

Deckard's deep-drawn breath was nearly a sob. No wonder it was as though war had been declared between replicant and human. The humans, weary and defeated, losing all touch with their feelings, could not stand the constant reminder of what they had lost -- and so they programmed the Nexus Six replicants to autodestruct after four years.

Murder, and false memories.

Memories...

Six hours Roy had taken to die. Six hours, and he had clung to even the pain, as though the pain made sharp within his mind the memory of all he had seen, all he had felt, all he had learned in the four short years that made up his life.

And for six hours he had talked, telling Deckard of what life was like as a slave Up There: the torture he had gone through, knowing that any second, any moment, for any reason and for no reason, he could be destroyed.

And yet, withal, the wonders he had seen. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. C-beams glittering in the dark near the

Tannhauser Gate." Yet he had left those wonders willingly, for the chance to find life and freedom on Earth.

And he, and those who had followed him, had found death.

Deckard's hands tightened on the wheel of the roadcar. No more death. No more. There had to be a way. If he could only bring life for once...

The rain beat against the windshield in an almost solid curtain, but looming through it were the towers of the city. He had not heard the spinner passing overhead, but he assumed that Gaff and Bryant were already back at police headquarters. And Rachael still on the strand... But he had had to leave her, lest his concern for her be marked by Bryant and his motives questioned. Then Rachael's death would be in vain.

He could not allow that.

Now Bryant would be waiting to hear from him, would be waiting for him at the police headquarters.

Deckard snorted. Let him wait.

A grin slashed hunting-knife sharp across his face.

Murder would out, and he would help it. It was time to stop the slaughter, stop the slavery.

\*

Deckard stopped off at his apartment only to get a change of clothing. Then, after dropping his groundcar off at a lock-and-park, he commandeered a spinner and headed for Tyrell Corporation headquarters.

The corporation's twin pyramids towered so high above the skyscrapers of San Angeles, even above the looming industrial spires of Hellsector, that the sun was known, on occasion, to break through the smoky haze of pollution that lay like a permanent blanket over the city and shine through the upper windows of the offices where the corporate grandees held court.

Deckard landed the spinner atop the primary pyramid and took the elevator to the main reception area. He glanced around at permastone walls, marble floors, massive furniture. Was it only two days ago he had met with Dr. Eldon Tyrell to administer the Voight-Kampff test to his Nexus Six "demonstration model"?

A receptionist, the same one who had taken his name-badge that last time, came forward. She moved with the same grace, the same unconscious arrogance, that Rachael had possessed. Deckard played with the idea that she, too, might be a Nexus Six model, then dismissed that thought. Simply having this job, in this day and age,

was enough reason for arrogance. She probably functioned as an unofficial "hostess" for the Tyrell Corporation, and if that didn't call for a more-than-adequate salary...

Bet she can afford a live dog! He glanced at her sleek outline as she advanced on him. Better yet, a cat.

"Mr. Deckard? I assume there is a reason for this -- call?"

Something had been bothering him about Bryant's indoctrination speech. He seemed to have misplaced a replicant. Could he use that as his reason for being here?

He ran his hand across his scalp, smiled ingratiatingly at her. There was no response. Yeah, she was human all right.

"One or two things still need to be settled," he said, taking his cue from Bryant's unfinished business. "Miss -- ?"

"Leeds."

"Miss Leeds. Yes." He coughed apologetically, continued. "There're one or two things we still have to straighten out concerning our recent investigation. One replicant is still unaccounted for. We think there may be some bearing on Dr. Tyrell's murder, and -- "

She nodded, all brisk, strict efficiency. "What departments will you have to deal with? I'll contact the heads."

"Biomechanics, Design, and Records." Surely somewhere within this megalithic structure he would find an answer to his problem? The only trouble was -- how would he know the answer when he wasn't even sure of the question he was asking?

"Replicant sectors only?"

He nodded. He had no need to rifle through design concept for a new form of toaster. Nor yet to study records of the corporation's human employees.

She handed him visitor's passes to the three areas he wanted to investigate, adding, "Instructions on where the sections are located are on the back of the passes. If you'll step this way now, to the elevator banks?"

\*

The Biomechanical Labs were his first stop, even though he doubted he could follow the explanations of the corporation's biomechanical engineers, especially if they started throwing around technical jargon.

One thing he was sure of, however. Rachael had been designed without a specific termination date. Surely that offered hope that

there was some way to revert the aging process for other replicants? Perhaps an adaptation of the method used on her? But how much of the job done on Rachael was actually done in the major labs? Could Tyrell have designed his "special demo model" by himself?

Too many questions.

"Have you tried every possible combination of intracellular biochemical reagents?" The words, culled from hundreds of learning seminars, meant nothing to him, but they apparently made sense to the frank-faced young scientist facing him.

"Mr. Deckard, what possible -- "

Deckard glanced around the room, his face a picture of guilt. Drawing the scientist aside, he whispered, "Look, we don't want this to become common knowledge or it might start a panic, but we picked up a rep who's been listed on the books as 'dead' because of the age factor. Damn skinjob should've run out of steam three years ago, but here it was, living just like a human, right down to the wife and family." The lies came smoothly, believably. The way they always came. He was a Blade Runner. And that meant, soon or late, a lie.

"Family? But, Mr. Deckard, it's biologically impossible for replicants to breed. If this, this 'Methuselah' replicant was living within a family structure, it must have married and adopted some children after it passed over the line."

"Passed over the line?"

"After it took on a human identity."

Deckard shrugged.

"I don't know, Doc. You tell me it's impossible for skinjobs to breed, but the lab boys back at HQ tell me a gene scan on the kids came out positive for the damn rep to be their old man."

He let that sink in, then added the capper. "Our lab techs tell me they don't think it's a case of natural longevity, either. If the skinjobs have a way of getting around cellular breakdown, we have to find out how they do it, so we can stop them."

"Replicants, Mr. Deckard, replicants. Must you Blade Runners always be so -- " He broke off, curiosity overcoming disgust. "Can I see this replicant? The Methuselah one?"

Deckard shrugged, tried to look apologetic. "'Fraid not. 'Fore we realized there was anything special about it, anything abnormal, we 'retired' it and sent the corpse to the crematorium." He tensed, wondering if the other would accept his story. It was thin as hell, but it was all he could come up with quickly.

Frowning, the scientist turned back to his lab table. "It would certainly have made things easier if I could have studied the replicant's blood composition for biochemical anomalies." He stared down at his computer keyboard. Deckard's tension grew. This had to work. Tell a research scientist someone else'd already done something, and --

"We were always warned that EMS recombinant technology would result in a carcinogenic mutation, but if..." The scientist seated himself at the console, and his fingers played over the keyboard. He did not even notice when, smiling victoriously, Deckard left the room.

He'd be back in a day or so. Perhaps by then...

Standing in the empty hallway, Deckard looked first one way, then the other. Should he try Design next, or Records? It seemed six of one, half-a-dozen of the other. In the end, it was proximity that governed his choice. Design was closest.

Turning left, he headed for the elevator banks. An elevator car was already on his floor. He entered, and the doors closed behind him; a feminine voice asked his destination. He fitted the chit for Design into the feedtray and the elevator noiselessly descended to Floor 235.

He looked around curiously as he disembarked. It was darker here than in either the reception area or the Biomechanical Labs. The ceilings were lower, the windows not so large, and the lighting fixtures further apart. Moreover, this far down the sun would almost never break through the yellow acid-smog that curled outside the windows.

Greeting him was a watered-down version of Rachael: hair less lacquered, suit not so sharply tailored, makeup less perfect. Her manner, however, was every bit as brisk and businesslike as Rachael's had been.

"This area is off-limits for non-authorized personnel."

Reaching into his pocket, Deckard pulled out his ID and handed it over to her with his visitor's pass. "I'm Deckard. Blade Runner 26354. I've been cleared for this area."

A suggestion of hostility flickered across her face at the mention of his profession, then disappeared, leaving Deckard to wonder if he had imagined it. She examined his ID voucher and visitor's pass closely, clearly expecting one or the other to be a hoax. "If you'll excuse me a moment?"

He nodded, watched as she strode across the room to the vid-phone on her desk. The conversation was short, but she did not rejoin him immediately, instead, she called something up on the small terminal beside the phone, then nodded to herself. Finally she returned, handing him his ID and pass.

"What can we do to help you, Mister Deckard?" Her voice caressed the honorific as if it were a private joke.

He looked around, shrugged. "Anything, everything. We're trying to close off a recent case, but there are one or two loose threads, including a missing replicant. So the more I know about skinjobs, the better." He paused. A faint glimmer of distaste, strangely combined with ironic appreciation, crossed her face at his choice of words, but she said nothing. Frowning slightly, he continued. "When you design a replicant, do you slap any old thing together, or do you -- "

"No, of course not." She looked him over carefully. "Replicants are designed according to rigid standards. We look at the job they're required for, then work around that."

"The packaging. Is that from your heads? From people you know? From trideo personalities?"

She smiled coldly. "That depends on the intricacy of the specimen needed, Mr. Deckard."

That sharp, niggling nodule of curiosity that had made him so successful at his profession was back. "How do you mean?"

Quite obviously, she resented discussing her work with a layman. "If the unit is to be used in simple manual labor," she replied finally, "we build for brute strength, bypassing any intellectual development beyond that of a dull-normal or average IQ: your typical high-school dropout or graduate, respectively."

He smiled wryly, thinking of Leon. Brute strength, limited intelligence. So? The routine labor replicant would still be smarter and healthier than half of the "normal" humans remaining Earthside.

She continued. "Designation here would be N6MAC or N6FAC, depending on whether the laborer were male or female."

"AC?"

"Top-of-the-line physical development, dull-normal to average intelligence."

"There are other categories?"

Again that careful survey, the mixture of insult and amusement. "Of course. The AB models are our most widely-used numbers. They're top-of-the-line in physical development, and bright-normal to superior in intelligence."

"And the packaging your AB models come in?"

She eyed him as though he were a two-headed mutant, or a replicant whose programming had proven defective. "I've already explained that packaging depends on the specimen specifics required, Mr. Deckard."

He was tired of her games with words and glances. Pulling out a chair, he dropped into it. "Explain it to me again."

She primmed her mouth. If Tyrell Corporation had replaced God and the Church, as the more irreverent of his co-workers claimed, this woman was one of the most steadfast of the new religion's acolytes.

Or was she? There was something else here, something to the young woman's hostility. Something that didn't feel right... He shook his head, pushing the thought aside for later consideration.

"Explain," he repeated.

"If a personal bodyguard is requested, we would, of course, make the physical package more muscular than if the order is for a book-keeper. If a, um, sexual companion is required," the look she swept over him was deliberately mocking, "a certain skill in amatory affairs is more important than brute strength."

"That I could have figured out myself. You design the skinjob around the job to be filled. What about details, though? Face, hair, eyes? The things that aren't a part of job function?"

She hesitated. "In many cases the purchaser has an idea of what he or she wants and we either supply an approximate match from our catalogue or design to personal specifications."

"That's for the personals, for the colonization freebies. What if it's not one of those?"

She looked around as if for some way out. "I don't understand what you're -- "

"Combat models? Especially the higher-ranked sweeties in charge of colonization defense programs?"

A shade of uneasiness entered her eyes. Deckard pressed on. "Or what about a demo model? Wouldn't the designer have a lot to say about how the model looks?"

She nodded reluctantly. "The designer has the final word in such a case."

He felt a rush of excitement. "Are such models ever duplicated?"

She spoke slowly, weighing her words. "Unless it's a special demo model, all of our models are duplicated. It wouldn't be cost-effective to design a working model and use it only once; we'd never keep up with the demand. Once a model has been developed, the initial customer gets sole use for a limited period. After that time runs our, the model is placed in our general catalogue."

He waved a vague hand in her direction, as though this meant nothing special to him. "With certain exceptions."

"With -- certain exceptions, yes."

Hiding his disappointment, he pushed himself out of the chair. Rachael had been a "special demonstration model". She was truly one-of-a-kind. Tyrell's own toy.

Damn.

"You've been -- more than helpful. If I need information about individual models?"

"Records Department." She smiled then, and he tensed. As though the sudden surge of adrenaline prompted it, the instinct, the knack that had made him the best Blade Runner around, furnished the answer to the woman's behavior.

A replicant! She's a god-damned replicant!

Now he knew the difference in her that he had immediately absorbed, and understood, also, her hostility when he named his trade: retiring her kind.

Damn! Is everyone at Tyrell off the production line?

Her smile widened, ice-sharp, as she took in his expression. "You might want to check into model N6MAB71317a while you're in Records. I think you'll find the file -- interesting."

She almost purred the last word.

He looked at her doubtfully. After such a buildup, he had expected an earth-shattering revelation. Instead, just the file for some anonymous replicant? "N6MAB71317a? I'll remember that, thanks."

He left the department. And the replicant's laughter echoed in his ears.

\*

Four hours later he leaned over his 97th-floor balcony to stare blankly at the garbage-strewn streets below. He ignored the rain plastering his short hair to his head and soaking through his mismatched clothing.

Memories.

Again and again this case came back to memories. Rachael's. Leon's. Roy's. His. Memories.

He took a long swig of scotch. It burned as he swallowed it, and he wondered: did he really like scotch, or did he only remember liking it? He flung the glass away. It hit the wall behind him; even without looking he could tell by the sound that it had smashed into a hundred razor-sharp pieces.

File 71317a had been informative. It had been more than informative. It had destroyed his world.

Model N6MAB71317a was the sixth replicant who had escaped from the offworld colony of New Caledonia with Batty and the others -- the one he had not been encouraged to remember.

Bryant must have been worried, showing him the pictures of Batty and Leon and Pris and Zhora, must have been holding his breath for fear he'd ask, "Hey, okay, so one of the reps got fried trying to break into the Tyrell Corporation. What happened to the sixth one?"

But no. He'd been too stupid to count.

He turned, reentered the large, empty apartment. In response to the heat of his body, the lights came on. Tossing the printout of file 71317 on the couch, he continued on to the bathroom.

He stared at himself in the mirror. Funny. He felt like he always felt. Like he remembered feeling.

What he did not feel like was model 71317a, a top-of-the-line replicant who had had a dead man's memories grafted onto him, a replicant who'd been sent out to track down his brothers, a "skinjob" who'd been used to kill his own.

A Judas-goat.

But the file, which included a photo printout and full physical display, didn't lie. Why should it?

He studied the face in the mirror. How much of it was his, really? What had Deckard, the one who'd died in a drunken car crash two years ago, what had he looked like? How much of what he remembered could he trust?

Even his own face...

He leaned close to the mirror, trying to see some difference in the image that stared out at him now that he knew a different truth. Nothing. Straightening, he rubbed his hands across his face. Could he "erase" himself? Put on a new self, a new face, as easily as they'd given him a dead man's memories? He winced as he rubbed the still-raw wound under his right eye. He knew how and when he'd gotten that injury -- didn't he? -- but what of the scar on his chin?

His memories -- Deckard's memories? -- told him of going through a car window fifteen years ago, of lying on a rain-slicked pavement staring up at his wife's frightened, panicked eyes. He even had memories of the arguments they'd had later, when he'd refused to have the plas-docs clean up the scar. Iran hadn't understood, any more than she'd understood why he didn't just up and leave, take advantage of one of the bonus-laden government offers for offworld colonists.

You've got the brains, the health, the training, she'd say over and over and over, and all he'd ever been able to say in response was, "No, babe, I need the room to make choices, not just grab onto the same brass ring as millions of other guys."

Choices. That had always been the important thing to him -- to Deckard.

And now all the choices he'd ever made in his life came down to this, that he had no choice. That the he he remembered was dead, dead and ash now, and he'd been brought back to life by the magic of the Tyrell Corporation -- and an illegal brain-cell recording that had rested in Bryant's office-safe for the past two years.

Choices.

Choices and memories.

Whose face was that in the mirror? Rick Deckard's? That's what his memories said. He remembered that face -- younger, to be sure, but still the same face -- sticking out over a flapping gown on graduation day, or over a monkey-suit on the day he'd gotten married, or grinning idiotically the day his son was first placed in his arms. (His son. But then, replicants can't breed. There was no sense of, of dissonance there, no gap in his memory, no blurring where perhaps another face might once have been. The face in the mirror fit Rick Deckard as easily as the size nines in his closet.

The only trouble was -- file N6MAB71317a said that the face in the mirror, comfortable enough fit though it might be for Rick Deckard, belonged to John Madden, designed to be second-in-command of the Planetary Expedition Forces assigned to New Caledonia.

(Second-in-command...Roy Batty's second-in-command...)

Now here he was, not even able to remember what his own face looked like.

Memories. Woven together to form the fabric of his days. Strand after strand of hand-picked memories woven into a seamless whole, until it seemed the memories -- and the man -- were real.

Who had chosen which memories he would keep? That was power. To pick and choose among the memories of a man's life, like a weaver picking and choosing among the colored yarn on a loom; to take the memories from one man's skull and deposit them whole in the brain of another man, completely erasing the other's being and existence in the process.

He reached out, touching the mirror. His hand was shaking. Where was John Madden? Dead? Sleeping? And did he really want to know?

He smiled bitterly. No wonder Gaff had been trailing him. Set a thief to catch a thief -- or in this case, a replicant to catch a replicant -- but be sure to keep your eye on him, just in case. Just

in case the memory implant slipped, and your fox suddenly realized he was hunting with the hounds.

And no wonder, too, that each of the four replicants he'd just tracked down had greeted him so strangely. A lost comrade, friend, brother, now well and truly lost -- They'd all, up to the end, hoped he'd regained his own memories.

Deckard rubbed his hand, the broken fingers still bandaged and smarting. He grinned wryly -- Guess it didn't work, Roy.

He slammed his hand against the wall. The pain was reassuringly real. He could still feel, still think, still plan. He didn't know how long the Deckard implant would last, but while it did, he was well and truly committed to that role.

He was Rick Deckard. He had no idea what had happened to the consciousness that was -- that had been -- John Madden. He was Rick Deckard.

And Deckard, now that he had something worth fighting for, would not be content to lie back and die again (What was it like, dying? Is that memory buried someplace in my mind, too?), would not become one of the faceless "little people", not ever again.

Fleeting, he wondered if Gaff and Bryant had been informed about his new knowledge; he could only hope that they had not been. Blade Runners usually functioned autonomously, and there was no reason why the Records Department at Tyrell should alert Police HQ about the files he'd extracted from their computer's memory banks.

As for the replicant in Design, the one who had put him onto his own file... He hoped she'd been operating out of sheer spite, and would not actually betray one of her "own" kind. Or that she had, quite simply, thought he should know the truth about himself -- if not for altruistic reasons, then to destroy his usefulness to the Blade Runner unit. It had to be one or the other. Otherwise, she would already have contacted Bryant and he'd be "retired" before he could begin.

He smiled bitterly. He'd better hope hard. That encounter had taught him that not all replicants had found their souls. Not like Rachael, not like Roy. Not like -- John Madden.

After one last, close scrutiny of his familiar/unfamiliar face, he wandered back to the living room, stared at the other files littering the chairs and floor. Where the hell to begin?

Picking up the file on Roy Batty, he leafed through the printout. N6MAA10816a. Top-of-the-line indeed. The Tyrell Corporation kept thorough records on their replicants. His own file -- the file of the person, the being, he had been before he became Rick Deckard -- had been full, and so was Roy Batty's.

Deckard -- he was still Deckard, at least to himself, with all of Deckard's thoughts, all of his memories -- was awed by Batty's exploits. In almost four years of continuous service, the combat specialist had fought in a total of twenty-six battles ranging from deep space to the bogs and jungles of New London and then to the ice-capped wastes of Novo Muskov, finally being sent to New Caledonia as head of planetary defenses.

(And I was there, with him. What was it like? What -- )

N6MAA. Yes. Top-of-the-line both physically and mentally, with an IQ that, quite literally, could not be measured.

A battle-machine with the soul of a poet. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. Who else would have described the scene in just that way? Who else would have seen such things? He, the he he'd been, Madden, had viewed some of those far wonders with Batty and the others; had seen the stars from deep space, had known the thrill and despair of combat, had chosen to follow Batty to Earth.

Why?

Every replicant ever decanted knew that Earth meant death. Why would he, why would the others, follow Batty down to sure death? What was Batty to him, to Madden, that he would follow him?

And the others? What had they meant to Madden? Deckard remembered the hatred and despair in Zhora's eyes as she throttled him, remembered the desperation in Pris's eyes as she stared at him over her shoulder before spinwheeling into an attack. What ties had there been between the replicants and Madden that, even recognizing him now for the enemy, and fighting desperately for their lives, the replicants -- save only Leon, so much more simple and direct than the others -- had held back that extra millimeter that would have meant his death, and not their own?

Memories. Lost now, as completely as though Madden, and not Deckard, were dead.

Deckard forced his attention back to the printout in his hands. Quickly, he scanned to the end of the file, noting an addendum posted after the successful rebellion in New Caledonia and Batty's subsequent return to Earth by hijacked shuttle through the Tannhauser Gate.

"THIS MODEL UNRELIABLE," stated the readout. "TRACERS FILED. IN THE EVENT OF OVERT ACTIVITY RETIRE N6MAA10819a IMMEDIATELY."

Deckard sank onto the couch, held the file in trembling hands. A life, no matter how short-lived it ultimately proved, (I got, what, one, maybe one and a half years to go? Unless the doc...), had been given him. Maybe it wasn't too late for him to return that life, and with interest.

At least now he knew where -- and how -- to begin.

\*

In the days that followed, Deckard relearned the advantage to being a successful Blade Runner. He shuttled back and forth between his apartment and the Tyrell Corporation, and his presence at the latter was considered routine. Bryant was in contact with him only once, and that was to recommend that he go on a long vacation and report back to work in two weeks.

"Got a bonus all picked out and waiting for you, Deck. You're gonna love it," the police chief had said.

Deckard, hoping he was still acting like the "real" Deckard, shook his head. "I told you I was quits, Bryant. What makes you think that last job made me change my mind?"

"You'll be here, Deck," Bryant said, and Deckard noticed how the policeman used his name almost like a talisman, as though to remind himself that the man on the viewscreen was really who he was supposed to be. "And if you're not, I'll just send Gaff out to arrest you again."

Deckard had shut Bryant off without replying. Now he could only hope that Bryant's message meant what it appeared to say, and that he had not yet been tagged at headquarters.

Right. I go in there after this "vacation", and I can just see the "bonus" I get. "Hey, Deck! Surprise! You're retired!" Bang! Bang!

Before that could happen, he had things to do, such as cancelling the warnings in certain replicant files, and places to go.

He just hoped Gaff wasn't still tailing him. He hadn't seen the other Blade Runner for a while and that made him a nervous as -- as a replicant on the run.

He snorted. He still didn't know what Gaff was in this for. Why the unicorn warning? For that matter, why hadn't Bryant retired him right after Rachael's death? Were they waiting, trying to see if the Deckard programming would hold?

Right. Instant immortality. And he was the guinea pig.

Deckard entered the biomechanics lab. His contact, Dr. Sorvegson, looked up, his expression half-triumphant, half-nervous. "Mr. Deckard --" He hesitated, then went on. "I found an EMS molecule that does not cause a carcinogenic reaction in the replicant's system. It --"

"That's pretty fast." Deckard had hoped for results, but not this quickly.

Sorvegson's gaze dropped. "It was already in the computer. In a lock-coded program."

"Tyrell." Deckard spoke softly, almost to himself. "He had it all along."

Sorvegson glanced around guiltily, then nodded. "We've always accepted as a given that replicants can't breed. In fact, it's a bit of a joke in Bio-engineering, that the onslaught of physical adolescence hits them just as their systems begin their inevitable disintegration. 'Dead for Love', the engineers say."

Deckard hid his distaste and tried to remember that, to Dr. Sorvegson, the replicants he so callously referred to had no more humanity than a toaster. Less, probably. Chances are he's programmed his toaster to answer him back in the morning.

"Okay. So every skinjob going is programmed to replay 'Romeo and Juliet'. So?"

"So after you told me about the Methuselah replicant having children, I started to access new information into the computer. I found an EMS safe molecule which attaches itself to the pituitary. It releases sex hormones into the bloodstream -- and destroys the induced aging virus in the replicant body at the same time."

Deckard, hiding his surprise at the "truth" uncovered by his talltale about the "Methuselah replicant's" children, pursed his lips thoughtfully. "So if the reps can live past puberty, they can live to be God-alone-knows how old?"

The doctor nodded.

"Tyrell. That arrogant bastard. Who died and made him God?"

"Deckard." A thread of fear ran through Sorvegson's voice. In the corporate world, even the dead (Wonder how long it'll be before they double the old man's brain cells onto some damn bastard of a replicant?) could inspire dread. "If it leaks out that I told you -- "

Deckard held up his hand. "Don't worry. No one will ever know I heard it from you." He stood there quietly a moment, considering the implications. "So now the premature aging process can be reversed, right?"

Dr. Sorvegson nodded. "Not only that, but the molecule functions just as well combating carcinogenic reactions in human cells. Types of cancer and leukemias that weren't treatable by chemotherapy and surgical means can now be treated, and with a prediction of a damm good success ratio." He punched out a coded series on the computer, pointed to the vid-screen. "That's it."

Deckard eased behind the doctor, studied the screen. Even to his untutored eyes there seemed a certain rightness about the hills and valleys of the molecular readout. It had form and beauty.

So that's what Tyrell's been keeping to himself all these years.  
So scared he wouldn't be God anymore, he let humans die of cancer  
rather than give replicants a chance to live.

And he'd wondered how anyone could have so callously used the dead Deckard, the living Madden? After this, that had probably been child's play.

Deckard's fingers ached with the need to punch out a hard copy of the information of the viewscreen. He had someone in mind who could use it.

"Can't understand a thing your computer says, doc, but I'm glad you found it. Will it help you with our problem?"

"Humm? What problem is that, Mr. Deckard?" His uneasiness over the hidden formula had obviously driven the original problem from Sorvegson's head.

"How to reverse the formula," Deckard reminded him. He could tell by the suddenly empty look on the other's face that Sorvegson had not even thought of that aspect of the situation. There was, at least for the moment, no antidote to this cure.

Sorvegson licked his lips, peered around the lab. "What -- what do I do with this information, Mr. Deckard? If anyone finds out I broke into a top-security clearance code-locked program, I could be --"

Smiling, Deckard held out his hand. "It's a police matter now, Doctor. Just hand it over, cancel the program, and no one will ever know where the information came from."

Sorvegson hesitated, civic and medical responsibilities clearly at war. Deckard's mouth tightened and he gestured sharply. "Doctor."

Sorvegson nodded abruptly, and pulled a hard copy of the readout. As Deckard watched, he erased the information on the screen. Then he handed the printout over to Deckard.

"I hear scientists have terrific memories. Relax, doc, this'll make you a hero when you 'invent' it." Pocketing the information, Deckard turned, then faced the doctor once more. "Don't forget to work on that antidote for us. We may need it if any 'Methuselah' skin jobs like that last one show up."

"Replicants, Mr. Deckard, replicants." The scientist retained a hint of nervousness.

"And don't worry, Dr. Sorvegson. No one will know what I've learned." No people, actually. Just a few replicants. An ironic smile caught at the corner of his mouth. And no one counts those. Still smiling, he left the lab.

\*

It took barely ten minutes to go from the Tyrell Corporation to his apartment. He took the elevator to the 97th floor, the door sliding open smoothly. He stepped out, then paused.

Something was wrong, and his senses immediately alerted him to it. He yanked his gun out, held it steady before him, and advanced down the hallway. He tried his apartment door; it was unlocked.

Slamming the door open, he rolled forward into the apartment. He got to his feet and slowly made his way into the living room, then into the bedroom area, his eyes searching the blank spaces. No one was there.

But someone had been.

Gaff. He was onto me all along. His hand clutched the butt of his gun almost convulsively.

Another silver-foil unicorn stood on top of the ESPer unit. Riding the unicorn was a gold foil warrior bearing a shiny banner and a tiny sword.

Remembering the dreams he'd been having, the dreams of a white-silver unicorn in a forested glade, Deckard thought he understood the message Gaff was sending. The message and the warning. John Madden had come back to Earth from the lands of faerie, and death had been his toll. Now he, Deckard, his job done, faced a second death. But if he could escape, and bring the gift of life to his brothers...

Deckard frowned. Why was Gaff warning him? Unless...

Gaff was one of the "little people", and had come up the ranks through the ranks; he was a good enough Blade Runner that he'd always been one step ahead of him, and he, Deckard, was -- had been -- the best. It must rankle, to have even a reposessed replicant given the nod over such skill. And the "little people", who had just as much at stake as the replicants, what if they were planning an uprising of their own soon?

Especially if not all the "little people" were little people?

There must be quite a few "little people" with Gaff's abilities. If they were to rise against their few remaining rulers...

If they did, what should a good little replicant do?

Smiling, Deckard removed all evidence of where he might be going from his apartment, packed his bags.

A good little replicant would do what every good little three-year-old did.

He'd go home.

\* \* \*

As he'd thought, hijacking a shuttle from Earth proved easy. Who, after all, expected such a thing? Most "normals" who wanted to leave were shipped out in style. The "little people" were too cowed to pull such a stunt, and there was no one else who might even consider such a move.

No one but a replicant named Deckard, who had once been called Madden.

Calgary Heights was the capital of New Canada, and its name fit it well. An aerie suitable only for an eagle and his mate, the city perched where cold winds swept down from the higher mountains to wash every breath of pollution and contamination from the town. Mining was the prime source of revenue, and the townspeople had sent only last year for a peace-keeping force from Earth.

The Tyrell Corporation had handled the request.

Deckard landed the shuttle on the landing field outside Calgary Heights, then walked down and entered the unguarded gates. The man he sought was across the great plaza, his mobile face alight with laughter and his gloved hands waving in the air as he spoke to his companion. His uniform, tan with red piping, fit him like a glove, and his light hair was close-cropped under his military cap.

Drawing a deep breath, Deckard reassured himself that the computer printout of the safe molecule was still in his pocket, then crossed the square.

"Roy?" he said hesitantly.

The man turned, laughter stilled. Crystal-blue eyes gazed at him, a look almost of recognition stirring in their depths.

Deckard held out his hands and smiled. He greeted the other replicant.

"Brother."

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## BLACK ROSES

Bring me black roses  
if you care to  
remember  
today  
is my birthday:

this is the hour  
the quarter chimes have  
struck:  
one  
two  
three,  
and now  
it is  
time.

Not fair,  
but sweet  
and swift the fading  
flowers of memory  
you might have brought me  
beautiful dying  
flowers;  
would it have been so hard?

Still,  
before the bell tolls  
I will show you something  
of what it is to have lived  
truly,  
for I know, oh,  
I know  
the power of a vision.

See:  
a handful of petals  
thus,  
born of man's desire,  
and barely awakening to beauty  
we die,  
black roses,  
our doom appointed  
in that prodigy of conception  
which brings us to  
this blossoming,  
dark and beautiful  
black roses,  
see what you have  
brought to me  
this day.

LIZ SHARPE



C.WALSKE

# *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

- *Pat Nussman*

I met a lady in the mead  
Full beautiful, a faery's child;  
Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild.

—John Keats,  
"La Belle Dame Sans Merci"

It was cold. Any normal person would have found the shack's interior cold almost beyond bearing, numbing to all the senses, but Rachael didn't notice. Perhaps because she was colder than any arctic clime could be. Perhaps because she had to be that cold.

She didn't stop to think about it. Introspection had always been foreign to her and always would be. She had her job; she did it. That was all.

The wind, a questing, unnatural force racing legless over the tundra, rattled at the decrepit wooden door, as though seeking entrance. Her eyes shifted uneasily. The abnormal emptiness tickled at her consciousness; she felt more at ease among the crowded canyons of Los Angeles, her natural environment. Not that she thought about it — it wasn't her concern. But it was an irritation.

The gale, spending its fury upon the door, sent petulant drafts of icy air through its cracks, then subsided into a murmur. Automatically, Rachael turned up the synthetic fur collar of her coat.

At the rustle of movement, Rick Deckard turned from the crumbling fireplace situated in a corner of the tiny cabin. He shot her a half-smile, his bare hands chafing at the sleeves of his inadequate jacket. "Freezing, isn't it? Damned cold." He renewed his effort to kindle a flame, his numb hands fumbling with paper and lighter. "Won't be long now, though. I'll get you warm." His back was completely turned to her now as he concentrated on the fire.

"I'm not cold," she replied indifferently. She thrust a hand under the shelter of her coat. The object she grasped had been warmed by her body, but she couldn't feel the heat of the metal through her glove. "Take your time."

She pulled the object out. It was natural to her hand and she used it with ease, as though it were part of her body.

On Rick Deckard's back, blood appeared, flowered outward in a familiar red blossom. He spun around awkwardly, still in a crouch, and gaped at her, an inane look of surprise spreading over his face.

She fired again. And again. She had learned long ago how resilient replicants were, particularly the Nexus 6 models. Retiring them was an art. But then, wasn't she the best? At least she was since the real Rick Deckard had died, a victim of alcohol and his own absurd sensibilities.

The replicant writhed and jerked under her repeated blasts. It took a long time for him to stop moving. When he did, she fired a few more times, for safety's sake. Finally, she reholstered her blaster, looking impassively at the still figure sprawled on the floor. For a replicant he had been good, very good. But not quite good enough.

If there were such a thing as regret within her, she almost would have felt it now. It had been pathetic, really, the replicant comforting the human, never realizing that it had been he who was programmed with false memories, he who was designed to hunt down his replicant brothers. Pathetic. She shrugged the thought aside. It was all part of her job.

She crossed the room in a few smooth strides and stood over the body of the replicant blade runner, studying it. Maybe they'd listen to her next time, not use an unstable character like Deckard for the memory program. With a memory like that, the thing was bound to go a little crazy. A cold smile curved her lips. Not that the programming didn't have advantages -- Deckard had possessed skills beyond police work.

She idly prodded the body with one foot, then turned to leave. Soon, she'd be back in the city. And glad of it. At the door, she spared the body a backward glance.

Yeah, he'd been pretty good in bed, but in the end it didn't matter a damn.

After all, he was just another skin job.





## YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

Roberta Rogow

"Hey, Batty, ya comin' with us?"

Roy Batty turned to face the owner of the voice, the jovial youngster with red hair and freckles, who called himself Parkins. Parky, as the rest of the squad named him, had stood beside Batty in their fight with the Miners, holding two of the enemy away until Batty could scramble clear of the falling buildings around them. He had taken the tall blond man under his wing, appointing himself Batty's champion for no reason that the other could understand. Now he was apparently under the delusion that Batty needed recreation.

"Aw, let'im alone, Parky!" Another voice, low and rasping, rang out. "He's not goong. All he wants to do is run laps!" There was a general snigger at this longstanding joke in the Squad.

"Where are you going?" Batty asked.

Parkins grinned hugely. "Where've you been? They've just opened a Club for us grunts. Girls . . . games . . . you know?"

"I bet he don't," Gianni, the big brawler, roared out. "I bet he's a gawdam virgin!" There was another roar of laughter at that.

"All right, men, that's enough." The voice of the Commander, DeSalle. "Batty's new to things, but he'll learn fast enough. Won't you, Batty?" The Commander stared hard at the soldier.

"Yes, sir." Deep in his brain was the knowledge that he MUST obey Commander DeSalle.

"Then come along, and see life!" Parky did an anticipatory jig.

"If you are all going, then i should go too."

"I should go too." Gianni imitated his stilted speech. "Geeze, you'd think the guy was a skin job, the way he talks."

"Don't say things like that," Parkins said, his smile fading. "Roy's no skin job, are you, Roy?"

DeSalle stepped into the breach. "Of course not. Batty's just young. Roy, I think you should get out of these barracks, too. You've got pay coming to you, after all . . . go ahead. Have a good time." DeSalle nodded sharply to the rest of the squad. "Just remember, men, we're still on Military Time. Lights-out at 2300, local." There was a chorus of groans and a few muttered curses.

Batty obediently changed his rough twill fatigues for the silky "dress-grays" that he had never worn before. The material felt oddly sensual, clinging to his body. Not at all like the overalls that had been designed to withstand the flora and fauna of a dozen wild environments on a dozen wild worlds.

"Don't mind Gianni," Parkins told Roy, as they joined the rest of the squad and marched out of the barracks and into the street. "He's got skin jobs on the brain. Thinks they're after his job! Hell, who'd waste their time making a machine that's going to get itself blown up or cut down in some fight or other?"

Batty considered this. He wasn't too sure what he did or didn't remember. He thought he remembered Earth: a hot, noisy place, with something that hummed and chattered at him all the time. The Squad now proceeded through the streets of a dusty outpost on a small mining colony, endlessly circling a yellow star not unlike Earth's sun.

He looked around the street and saw that the entire force was headed for the same place.

"Where are we going?" he asked Parkins.

"Haven't you seen the flyers?" Parkins took a fac'sheet out of his belt-box. "'Beverages, music, friendly hostesses . . .'" he quoted. "That means girls. Not these mining dogs, but real female women!"

Batty thought: Real female women as opposed to what?

Batty had not seen many women since he had joined the Squad. he remembered (or thought he did) several females, on Earth, but since leaving his training area, he had been with the Squad exclusively. They had been sent to protect the Company against the Miners, who had risen in protest against what they claimed were unfair labor practices. It had been a Miner who had set off the explosion that had rocked the building in which Batty and Parkins had been trapped. Batty had killed one Miner with a blow to the head, and another with his knife, while Parkins set the charges to level the entire area. Parkins insisted that Batty had saved his life.

Commander DeSalle had been pleased with Batty. Commander DeSalle had told him to go with Parkins, to see these real, female women. Therefore, Roy Batty followed the rest of the men to a large clapboard pre-fab at the end of the street, with a glowing red lantern over the door. It was at least twice as tall as any of the other Company buildings, and from its open door came the sound of loud music and the smell of alcohol and sweating bodies.

Batty stood for a moment in the door, his eyes trying to take it all in at once. There was a small anteroom, where a short fat woman in a black jump-suit checked his credit tab. Then Parkins nudged him into the main hall, which seemed to fill the entire ground floor of the place.

The walls were painted a violent pink, while the ceiling beams were left in their raw wooden state. On one side of the room was a raised platform, where musicians kept a steady blare of drums, horns and stringed instruments going.

On the other was a staircase leading to regions above the hot, noisy room, which was filled with men in uniforms and women wearing everything or nothing at all.

Batty began to sort out the ritual. A man would speak to a woman, they would smile or talk or dance, then they would go upstairs. Soon after, the woman would come down alone, then the man would come down and speak to the tall blonde woman who sat at the end of the musicians' platform, surrounded by men even taller than Batty.

Batty tried to understand what was happening. Parkins had been taken by the hand, by a brunette in a gown that was mostly glittering fringe. The girl and Parkins laughed loudly as they gyrated to the music. Batty stepped back, out of the path of the dancers.

"Hello." A soft voice spoke at his elbow. He turned to see a slender young woman with a halo of fair hair next to him. She had outlined her eyes in black, so that their blueness was exaggerated. Her dress was short, exposing long, long legs.

"Hello." Batty didn't know what to say next.

"I am Pris." The girl smiled at him.

"I am Roy. Roy Batty." There didn't seem to be more to add to it. They stood and listened to the music together. Parkins and his girl had taken over the dance-floor. A circle had formed around them, urging them to greater feats of athletic abandon.

Batty turned to his companion. "Do you like to listen to the music?" he asked politely.

Pris smiled, nodding to the beat. "Oh, yes. I like to dance. I like it much better than the other things."

"What . . . other things?" Batty asked.

Pris looked at him. "Don't you know?"

Batty shook his head.

"Then why did you come here?"

"I came because the others did."

Pris smiled. She looked around and the smile faded. "The Madam is looking our way. We must go upstairs now. She will be angry if we don't."

It was Batty's turn to frown. "Why? I thought you were supposed to be a . . . a friendly hostess." He repeated the words from the flyer.

Pris sighed. "She says she has not gotten her money's worth out of me. Come upstairs. We can talk there . . . or whatever you like." She led the way through the crowd of grey-clad men and semi-naked women to the staircase at the other side of the room. Roy was aware of the grins on Parkins' and Gianni's faces as he passed them in the crowd.

Pris led him up the narrow staircase to a small room at the end of a passageway. It contained a bed, a chair, a small sink and a stack of towels, and nothing else.

The walls were that same acid pink as the downstairs. There was a tiny lamp set into the wall above the bed, giving a tepid glow that provided barely any light.

He looked about the place curiously. It looked like a cage . . . where had he seen a cage? He didn't quite remember . . .

"Is this where you live?" he asked.

"No. It is where I work." She nodded towards the bed. "I must lie down now." She sat on the bed.

"Why?"

"It is what I do. Then you must lie down, too, and do It to me."

"It?" Roy was getting more and more confused.

"It is a game, if you like. You may take my clothes off, but you must not tear them. They cost extra if you do. But doing It is what you pay the money for."

"But you said you do not like to do It. Not as much as dancing."

Pris sighed. "It is what the Madam paid for, to get her money's worth of me. That is what they told me I had to do when I came here. I don't think it matters if I like it or not. The other girls say they don't, but they do It anyway."

Roy frowned. There was something wrong here. Pris should not have to do things that she did not like to do. He wasn't sure why he felt this way. He only knew that it would be good to make her smile again.

He sat down next to her. "I do not want to do anything to you that you do not want done," he said at last. "If you like, we can go downstairs and dance. And I will pay the Madam what she says. I would like to come again, and talk."

Pris smiled at him. "Oh, I like you. You are . . . different."

Batty said quickly, "You mustn't say that. I must not be different."

"But you are different. I can tell . . ." Pris leaned forward suddenly and kissed him on the lips.

Batty jerked back. He had not expected that. He ran his tongue over his lips experimentally, to see if she had bitten him.

"Is that what they do?" he asked breathlessly.

"To begin with. Sometimes." She shook her head. "The Madam is angry with me, because the men don't take me upstairs. They don't like me. They say I am not warm like the others." Pris peered at Batty. "Do you like me? Do you think I am warm?"

Batty leaned forward and kissed her. It was an odd sensation, lips against lips. Not quite like tasting, and not quite like biting . . . He broke away from her to look into her eyes again. Pris was smiling now.. He touched her bright hair, and the strands of it seemed to cause electric shocks down his arm. He smiled at her. Then somehow they were laughing together and kissing and laughing some more, all at once.

"Time!" someone outside the door yelled.

Batty leaned forward. Pris stopped laughing.

"You are to have only fifteen minutes," she said sadly. "If you take more than twenty, you must pay again."

"Then I will pay, and pay, and pay again and again!" Batty kissed Pris one more time. "And I will come back, I promise you, and get you away from here."

Pris left him alone in the room, while he caught his breath. He went down the stairs to the tall blonde woman. The Madam. She was wearing silver-gray robes that reminded him of the Squad's dress-grays somehow.

"Ya get yer money's worth, soldier?" the Madam rasped out, as he held his credit-tab out.

"Oh, yes," Batty said. He looked over to where Pris stood, back at her post, a lonely figure with long, long legs and a halo of fair hair. For a moment she looked at him across the crowded room, and the rest of the soldiers, the gaudy women, the huge guards, all seemed to vanish. There was only Roy and Pris, and they were going to be together, if it took everything that they had. He didn't know how he would do it, but he was going to get Pris for himself . . .

"Hey, Roy, I told you you'd like this place!" Parkins had apparently had his time with the brunette, and was ready for another round.

"Yes. But we must get back to the barracks," Roy reminded him. "The Commander told us to be back at 2300."

Parkins sighed. "Yeah. They're locking us up, same as usual. You'd think the Company's scared of us! Hell, they hired us, didn't they?"

Roy marched with the others as they made their way back to the barracks, where Commander DeSalle stood waiting for them.

"Have a good time, Roy?" he asked, as Batty passed.

Batty looked at DeSalle. There was something about the way he'd said that . . .

"Yes, sir."

"Good." DeSalle turned away, and Roy went to his bunk and lay down. He had much to think about.

"I like you, you are different," Pris had said. And his reply: "I must not be different."

Today he had discovered that he had feelings, emotions that he wasn't sure had been programmed. He liked Pris. He did not like the way she was being treated. He did not want to ever find that she liked someone else better, someone else who had gone Upstairs with her.

He had made a promise to her.

Parkins leaned over from his bunk and leered at Batty. "I guess you finally lost it, fella. You get your money's worth?"

Batty nodded. "Yes. I think I did."

\* \* \*

### "THE QUESTION"

*You fear our strength  
And the things that we can do,  
But you don't want the tasks  
We perform.  
"They're too dangerous," you say.  
Too dangerous for you,  
But not for us.  
Do you hate us  
Because of our physical advantages?  
Or because you are ashamed  
That we must do what you cannot?*

-- Alyns Lawchilde



## DOLLS

A room full of dolls,  
Man-created men;  
Play with them,  
Care for them,  
Cherish them,  
They will last forever.

A small group of friends,  
Man-created men;  
Trying to learn,  
Trying to grow,  
Trying to live,  
Knowing they will hardly last at all.

Dolls can't feel;  
Dolls can't cry;  
Dolls can't love;  
Dolls can't die.

People care;  
People fight;  
People strive;  
People have the right  
To live their lives  
With dignity,  
With honor,  
With the uncertainty of death  
And the hope of life itself.

Man-created men  
Or otherwise.

"EXORCISM" / Madge Longhurst

I've never hurt so much in my life --  
why did they have to build the damn things so tough?  
I suppose they're great for manual labor,  
and if we had another war they'd be terrific fighting machines.  
But for hunting they're rough sport,  
and it almost feels like murder when you shoot them down --  
even their superior muscular system can't stop  
them from bleeding all over the pavement.

I should never have taken the job, but I've run out of options:  
If you kill once it follows you, and you can't run fast enough  
to escape the look of blank surprise, the hatred, and the fear.  
So the only option left is to stop running, face the ghosts,  
and hurt for a little longer until you can erase from your mind  
the scene of them lying broken on the street,  
their glassy eyes reflecting the light of the police spinners.



"ANGEL OF DEATH"

*I tell myself that they  
Are not real,  
Not alive.  
But when I "retire" them,  
They bleed,  
And die anyway.  
I wonder what they feel,  
Waiting,  
Knowing.  
Are they afraid?  
Afraid of me?  
Afraid like me?*

Alyns Lawchilde

## BLADE RUNNER: FOUNDATIONS FOR CRITICISM

Taras Wolansky

### PART ONE

BLADE RUNNER is a difficult film. Few have failed to appreciate its visual splendors, but not so its complex story and naturalistic dialogue. As a basis for criticism, let us then review the story in some detail.

The opening titles give some of the background. In the 21st century, androids -- "replicants" -- are used for slave labor and cannon fodder in the exploration and colonization of other planets. None, however, are allowed on Earth; any who escape and come here anyway are promptly found and killed by "blade runners". (Not an inappropriate term, given that a derogatory term for replicant is "skin job".)

"Los Angeles, November, 2019." We float over a hellishly beautiful, night-time industrial landscape, toward two massive skyscrapers three thousand feet high, resembling Mayan pyramids. We enter a room in the pyramid, where an apparently slow-witted man named Leon is being interviewed/psychologically tested by a Mr. Holden, with the aid of a strange machine which monitors eye responses. Leon becomes agitated as the questioning continues, until a question about his mother moves him to shoot Holden several times.

In the rain-drenched street far below, lit by garish neon signs in Oriental scripts and filled by predominantly Asian crowds, we meet Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), ex-blade runner looking for other work. ("They don't advertise for killers in a newspaper," he reflects.) Overhead a sort of thalidomide Goodyear blimp floats, made of spines and giant TV screens, enticing people to emigrate "Offworld...a chance to begin again." Abruptly, Deckard finds himself arrested by his former colleagues and taken to headquarters.

Deckard's former commanding officer, Captain Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh) wants him back on the job. There is a group of extremely dangerous replicants loose in the city, and Deckard's successor, Holden, has been put in an iron lung by one of them. Through a mixture of flattery and threats, Deckard is persuaded. He had quit before because he had "a bellyful of killing", but resolves to stick it out as long as he can take it.

The replicants killed twenty-three people in the course of their escape, and lost one of their own number trying to break into the headquarters of the Tyrell Corporation, the company that made them. Holden was there testing prospective employees with a "Voight-Kampff" machine (the chief method of detecting replicants), on the theory that the replicants might try to infiltrate, when he was shot.

Bryant further explains that these replicants are more advanced than any Deckard ever faced before. They are so human-like that they tend to develop their own emotions after a few years. To prevent this they have been genetically engineered to live only four years. Deckard asks what happens if the "V-K" machine no longer works on these replicants, but Bryant does not answer.

Deckard is shown pictures of the four surviving replicants, as they appeared when they were manufactured: Leon (Brion James), a nuclear weapons handler; Zhora (Joanna Cassidy), a trained assassin; Pris (Darryl Hannah), a military prostitute; and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), a soldier and the probable leader.

Before starting his investigation, Deckard is sent to the Tyrell Building to "V-K" a new experimental replicant. He is created by Rachael (Sean Young), an assistant to Dr. Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), who asks him if he's ever "retired" a human being by mistake. Tyrell appears, and requests that Deckard test Rachael, to obtain a negative result. After Rachael has been sent out of the room, we learn that she failed the test; though Tyrell is pleased that it took over a hundred questions, instead of the usual twenty or thirty. She is the latest, experimental model with fake memories implanted in her brain, and does not even know she is a replicant.

Deckard and another blade runner, Gaff (Edward James Olmos), a street dude of indeterminate ancestry, go to the address Leon gave Holden. (Deckard compulsively listens over and over to the tape of Leon's interview.) While Gaff plays at origami with a bit of waste paper, Deckard searches the apartment. He finds what appears to be a large fish scale in the bathtub and, even more perplexing, what seems to be a collection of family photos. "Replicants don't have families," he reflects.

On the street below we glimpse Leon, watching.

Roy joins Leon; they proceed to the subzero workshop of the eyemaker, Chew (James Hong). (Roy announces their arrival with several lines from Blake's "America".) They terrorize and question him about "longevity...incept dates". Chew protests he knows nothing of such things, only eyes. In fact, he designed Roy's eyes. "Chew, if only you could see what I've seen, with your eyes." As Chew freezes, he tells them to go to one J.F. Sebastian, who can take them to the "big genius", Dr. Tyrell.

Deckard returns to his apartment building, exhausted; takes the elevator up to the 97th floor; then as it comes to a halt suddenly, explosively pivots and draws his gun: someone is in the elevator with him. Rachael, who could get no farther against the elevator's security system, is sitting in a dark corner. They enter his apartment. To prove to him that in spite of everything she is not a replicant, she shows him an alleged picture of herself as a little girl with her mother. He recites back to her some of her most secret memories, which he has read in her files. "They're not your memories. They're Tyrell's niece's." He looks away uneasily as she begins to weep. She throws the photograph on the floor and runs away.

Elsewhere in the city, a hard-looking blonde girl beds down for the night in the garbage on a doorstep, when she is startled by a man coming home to that building. Suddenly waiflike, she talks her way into his apartment; they trade names. "Pris." "J.F. Sebastian."

Deckard's apartment: his battered old piano is strewn with several generations of family photos (as if he too were trying to prove he is not a replicant with fake memories). He puts one of the photographs he took from Leon's apartment into a computerized magnifier and searches it until he comes upon the image of a woman -- Zhora? -- reflected in a mirror, with a sequined dress hanging near her; which reminds him of the scale he found.

Deckard has the scale identified -- artificial snake -- and follows the trail from maker to buyer. There he draws a blank: at Taffy Lewis's nightclub, the sleazy owner does not recognize the blown-up photograph. Feeling lonely, Deckard calls Rachael and asks her to join him. She refuses. An erotic stage act is announced: "Miss Salome and the Snake." Deckard sits back to enjoy the show, then starts when he sees Miss Salome.

After the show, Deckard visits Miss Salome -- Zhora -- in her dressing room. He claims to be a union official looking for "dirty holes" drilled in the walls by Peeping Toms. She attacks him and tries to stangle him but breaks off as other people enter the room.

Deckard pursues her through the crowded street. Yelling at pedestrians to get out of the way, he shoots her in the back as she flees, and shoots her again when she doesn't stay down. She crashes through a series of display windows filled with mannequins and fake snow as she dies. As Deckard approaches her body, he looks like he wants to throw up. In the background, we see Leon, probably her lover and presumably there to meet her, staring.

Gaff and Bryant appear on the scene, to congratulate Deckard and to inform him that another name has been added to his hit list: Rachael, who has disappeared. After they leave, Deckard sees Rachael in the crowd -- she must have decided to accept his

invitation after all -- but she turns away from him and melts back into the crowd. Deckard pursues; when suddenly he is grabbed by Leon. He draws his gun, but Leon bats it away with inhuman speed. Deckard is thoroughly beaten; but just as Leon is about to poke out his eyes, Leon's forehead explodes: Rachael has neatly plugged him with Deckard's gun.

Deckard's apartment: Rachael asks Deckard, if she flees to the north, will he hunt her down? No; he owes her one. She asks him about her inception date and longevity. He disclaims knowledge (falsely, it later turns out). Bitterly, she asks him if he has ever taken the V-K test himself; but he has fallen asleep. She sits down at the piano and somberly examines an ancient photograph of some young great-grandmother of Deckard's. She divests herself of her jacket with its padded shoulders, and lets down her hair, and begins to play. Deckard joins her. She explains that she remembers piano lessons, but wasn't sure it was she or Tyrell's niece. Deckard kisses her, but she draws away from him and tries to flee. He stops her at the door and takes her in his arms by force. "I can't rely on my memories," she protests, but then acquiesces.

Sebastian's apartment: As one of his many half-alive toys and manikins looks on with madly darting eyes, Sebastian tells Pris that he has not left Earth because he suffers from "Methuselah's syndrome" (evidently a mild form of progeria) and so failed the medical. Roy suddenly appears; Pris must have unlocked the door for him. He lets her know that Leon and Zhora are dead. "Then we're stupid and we'll die," she says. "No we won't," he replies.

Seeing Roy and Pris together, Sebastian realizes they are replicants: they are "too perfect". He did design work on their model himself, he boasts. Roy draws attention to a chessboard with game in progress. Sebastian's unseen opponent, it turns out, is Dr. Tyrell himself. Roy and Pris ask Sebastian for his aid, as fellow-sufferers of accelerated aging; he agrees, but weeps, because he knows he does it out of fear.

Roy and Sebastian take an elevator in the Tyrell Building, which crawls half way up the side of the building until stopped by Tyrell's security system. Roy feeds Sebastian good chess moves which interest Tyrell, who permits the elevator to proceed to his penthouse. Tyrell is startled to see Roy, but asks him what took him so long. "Not an easy thing, to meet your maker," says Roy. Roy demands "more life". Tyrell explains that the DNA cannot be reprogrammed, and that Roy should be content with the time he has had. "I've done questionable things," says Roy. "Also extraordinary things," replies Tyrell. "Nothing the god of biomechanics wouldn't let you in heaven for?" Roy asks, wistfully. He takes Tyrell's head in his hands, kisses him, and then, straining horribly, crushes his skull. Sebastian tries to flee.

In his moment of total triumph and total despair, Roy descends the glass elevator, the stars overhead, nameless emotions flitting across his face.

Deckard, in his car, is ordered to the apartment of Sebastian, whose body has been found in Tyrell's penthouse. Pris, disguising herself as a mannequin among Sebastian's toys, ambushes Deckard but he manages to shoot her. Like a broken mechanism, she beats her limbs on the floor and keens horribly until, in horror and desperation, Deckard finishes her.

Roy returns; Deckard tries to ambush him but misses: Roy is just too fast. They stalk each other, until Roy reaches through a wall and pulls Deckard's gun hand through. Roy breaks two of Deckard's fingers -- one for Pris, one for Zhora -- gives him back his gun and a clear shot. Again Roy is too fast and is only grazed. Deckard flees deeper into the building, looking for a way out.

Roy touches Pris's gaping wound and touches her blood to his lips, exactly as she had touched his lips when they were together. As he howls his grief, his howl is answered by Deckard, who is straightening out his broken fingers.

Deckard manages to climb through a hole to the next floor, drenched with water from the downpour going on outside, but loses his gun in the process. Roy's hand begins to curl up, the first symptom of a replicant's imminent cessation. To stave off the process for a few minutes, he drives a nail through the palm of his hand.

Finding his way to the next floor, Roy announces his presence by sticking his head through a wall and inviting Deckard to kill him. His face lights up when he sees Deckard ripping a metal pipe off the wall. He comes through the door and lets Deckard hit him in the head twice with the pipe. "That's the spirit!" he says.

As the insane game of tag continues, Deckard climbs out onto the window ledge and scales the building's cornice, but he has hardly reached the roof when Roy bursts out of a trapdoor. Deckard tries to leap to the next building, but doesn't quite make it. As he dangles by his fingertips, Roy easily makes the jump, holding a white bird he caught somewhere in one hand.

Roy scrutinizes Deckard. "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it. That's what it's like to be a slave." Roy smiles as Deckard's grip begins to weaken. In a final gesture of defiance, as his grip breaks, Deckard spits at Roy -- but faster and stronger than any human Roy grabs Deckard's wrist in his nailed hand and draws him up to the roof.

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe...Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion..."

"All those moments...will be lost...in time...like tears... in rain..." As Roy dies, his intact hand opens and the bird flies away into the gray sky.

"I don't know why he saved my life," muses Deckard. "Maybe, in those last moments, life was more precious to him than it had ever been before. Anybody's life... He wanted to know what we all want to know. Where did I come from. Where am I going. How long have I got... All I could do was sit there and watch him die."

Gaff lands on the roof in a police car. He throws Deckard his gun. "It's too bad she won't live," he says as he turns to leave.

Deckard returns to his apartment and finds the door ajar. Suspecting the worst, he draws his gun and enters. Rachael is asleep but unharmed. He asks her if she loves him, trusts him. She answers in the affirmative. On their way out Deckard finds an origami unicorn on the floor: Gaff had been there and let Rachael live. As they fly northward through the mountains, Deckard reflects that Gaff thought it would be only four years, but Tyrell had told Deckard that Rachael had no termination date. Deckard didn't know how long they'd have together. Who does?



## PART TWO

In 2019 the United States, or whatever government rules Los Angeles in that year, is engaged in a ferocious competition with some unnamed party, out among the stars. Note the professions of the replicants: soldier, assassin, nuclear weapons handler; and when Roy Batty reflects upon the most beautiful things he has seen, they are: "attack ships on fire" and "C-beams glittering in the dark".

This near state of war, though the people on Earth are almost unaware of it ("I've seen things you people wouldn't believe," says Roy), helps to explain why keeping androids in their place as slaves is an unquestioned part of policy. We who are willing to enslave our own sons in the service of national security can hardly be surprised when androids -- nobody's sons -- are enslaved for the same reason.

Los Angeles in 2019 seems to be a city past its height.

Enormous buildings constructed to house multitudes now stand partly empty. The people who remain are constantly exhorted to emigrate, "offworld". But not all are acceptable: the crippled, the defective, the ill, all must remain behind whether they like it or not; like J.F. Sebastian, or the gang of dwarves that attacks Deckard's car. And the Asians, who have been admitted to provide labor.

Great corporations are powerful in future Los Angeles -- look at the Tyrell pyramid with its suspended buttresses like World Trade Centers at forty-five degree angles -- but not all-powerful. The nightclub owner, Taffy Lewis, does not hesitate to be minimally cooperative with the blade runners.

We are quickly informed of the doubtful moral status of blade runners. Deckard has after all quit the job, even though this leaves him unemployed; and the Oriental counterman who acts as "interpreter" between Gaff and Deckard (when they are both pretending not to understand each other) knows Deckard by name but is surprised to learn his profession, as though he were concealing it. Our low opinion is reinforced when we meet what commands the blade runners.

On the other hand, the blade runners' prey is shown to be vicious and dangerous from the first scene of the film -- though in retrospect we can see that the android Leon shoots the blade runner Holden in what amounts to self-defense. We are informed that the androids (or replicants) killed twenty-three people in making their getaway; and not long afterward we see two of them terrorizing an old man with sadistic enjoyment. (The film leaves his ultimate fate undecided, but it would make sense that he was killed, both on practical grounds and to be consistent with the pattern of the film: Roy definitely kills the other two people who were involved in his creation.)

It is interesting that BLADE RUNNER, in which only a handful of people are killed, got such a reputation for violence; while other films, like STAR WARS and its sequels, can exterminate thousands with impunity. But in STAR WARS the enemy troops are carefully dehumanized (we never even see their faces) and their deaths are sanitary. In BLADE RUNNER even the androids are human, and their deaths are messy and horrifying.

Counterbalancing the negative impression of replicants is Rachael, cool and haughty, but very lovely and not apparently dangerous. When they first meet, she asks Deckard if he has ever killed a human by mistake: even though she is only "beginning to suspect" she is a replicant, she is already trying to narrow the gap between human and android.

That Dr. Tyrell is such a cold fish is important to our picture of Rachael. Were he played differently, we might think Rachael is his mistress, and never understand why she panics and tries to run away when Deckard kisses her, later in the film.

When Deckard questions her to test if she is a replicant, she fumbles with her cigarette lighter, betraying the nervousness beneath her poised and sophisticated facade. One of the questions asks what she would do if her hypothetical husband mounted a picture of a naked woman on the wall of their bedroom. She wouldn't let him, she replies. She should be enough for him -- a duplicate woman upholding the honor of the original over the duplicate.

Deckard is shocked when he learns that the reason Rachael is such a good facsimile of a human is that she has a human's memories implanted in her brain. This signifies that no one can ever again entirely rely on his memories to verify his identity. That sophomoric speculation about how could we tell if we were created last week with all our memories, suddenly becomes a real possibility. So when Deckard strews his piano with family photographs, he is really looking for corroboration of his identity.

This is not the only time photographs play a role in BLADE RUNNER. Deckard discovers Leon's cache of photographs, some of Leon's fellow replicants, others of more obscure provenance. More than any other of the replicants, Leon lusts for a family. Interestingly, the comic book version of the film preserves lines of dialogue, apparently cut from the finished film, in which Leon expresses his frustration at having been created with emotional needs and no way to satisfy them. (Replicants are sterile.) The line, "Nothing is worse than an itch you can never scratch," remains in the film.

Rachael brings Deckard an alleged photograph of herself as a little girl with her mother, trying to prove to him and to herself that she really is a human being, in spite of what the test and Dr. Tyrell say.

This is an interesting sequence in other respects. When Deckard stumbles into his apartment building's huge elevator, bleary-eyed, Rachael is sitting in a dark corner, waiting (the elevator requires voiceprint ID to operate) but Deckard does not see her until the elevator has almost reached his floor. He very nearly kills her on the spot, as his profession dictates. Too, he is terrified he let an android get the jump on him. But she is also the first android with which he has established some kind of social relationship; and she is in any case not an escaped android.

So he does not kill her, but nonetheless avenges himself upon her for so terrifying him. He quotes to her some of her secret memories, things she has never told a soul, and informs her that her memories really belong to Tyrell's niece. He feels a degree of remorse when she begins to weep: intellectually he may believe replicants are "just like any other machine", but emotionally he finds himself responding as to a young woman crying.

Deckard and Rachael respond to each other not as member-of-class-of-blade-runners to member-of-class-of-replicants, but as individuals, and in so doing provide the only hope this somber film vouchsafes us. He protects her when it is his duty to kill her; she kills a replicant to save his life.

It is after this that she first admits out loud she is a replicant. When Deckard tells her that the "shakes" she is suffering are "part of the business", she replies, "I'm not part of the business. I am the business." After Deckard falls asleep, she takes off her jacket with the padded shoulders -- she never wears it again -- and lets down her hair -- never wears it up again. She plays the piano to discover if she can: she cannot trust her memories.

But when Deckard offers to introduce her to certain other activities which she may also have never done before, she is fearful. It is a striking and passionate scene, the fragile and lovely Rachael and the brutal, almost reptilian Deckard.

We are so accustomed to the convention by which leading men and leading ladies fall in love, that we may not fully appreciate how thoroughly this is motivated in BLADE RUNNER. Setting aside all matters of mysterious chemistry: To Rachael, Deckard is proof that she is human though a replicant, for he knows what she is but loves her anyway. He is a protector as well (remember, Patty Hearst married her police bodyguard); her prospects without him being bleak indeed. To Deckard, Rachael is proof he is not the "sushi -- cold fish" his ex-wife called him. In a sense, both Rachael and Deckard see their humanity reflected in the other's eyes. Furthermore, by taking care of Rachael Deckard expiates a little of the sin which weighs heavily on his conscience.

Ridley Scott takes pains to make sure the audience is as much in doubt about just how human Rachael really is, as is Deckard himself. He throws a kind of faceted, insectoid light into her dark eyes from time to time when it will do the most good. (Occasionally the same light appears in other replicants' eyes as well.) Is this a woman warming to a man -- or a cold, calculating machine pursuing its survival -- or a wind-up toy going through motions? The balance tips part way to the human side of the question when Rachael tries to run away from Deckard, in a burst of peculiarly human irrationality. It is at this point that they become lovers. However, Deckard does not make a complete commitment to Rachael -- does not, in other words, completely accept her as human -- until after his encounter with Roy. Accepting Roy as human, Deckard must necessarily accept Rachael as well.

BLADE RUNNER is a deceptive film, and one of its deceptions is that it is a 'forties detective story set forty years in the future. True, it does draw inspiration from the film noir at its best, but it also turns the clichés of that genre on their

heads. Dr. Tyrell may be greedy, but he is also a creative genius -- not the stereotypical businessman who had gotten rich by stealing the ideas of better men, or through corruption. Rachael is not the stereotypical femme fatale who inevitably betrays the hero. Deckard exposes no corruption-among-the-elite -- if he exposes any corruption it is within himself. But most of all, Deckard fails to solve the mystery. This is why he never anticipates what Roy Batty is going to do next. In fact, at the end of the film no one is left alive who knows why the replicants came to Earth in the first place.

When I think back, I find that the SF and fantasy films which stick most tenaciously to my mind are all about failure: FORBIDDEN PLANET. THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING. AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON. THESE ARE THE DAMNED. THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE.

Another of the deceptions of BLADE RUNNER is the narration by Harrison Ford, which gives the impression that the story is being told from his viewpoint. In fact, the audience knows more than Deckard does, following the replicants as they pursue their goals, ultimately with even less success than Deckard.

To keep the audience from catching on too fast, however, the dialogue in the eye-maker scene is in a sense encrypted. "Morphology. Longevity. Incept dates." asks Roy. Chew, the eye-maker, understands what is being asked, but the audience does not. Only when Roy and Pris coerce Sebastian into helping them do we learn what they are trying to achieve.

When Roy finally confronts Tyrell, he calls him his "maker", and "the god of biomechanics". In the light of the parallels this film draws between the plight of the replicants and that of all human beings -- four years against fourscore -- this scene has strange reverberations. If Roy can condemn his creator for determining his lifespan at four years, why can we not condemn our Creator (if we choose to believe in one) for placing us under a death sentence at birth. Can we sit in judgment of God?

In so far as he creates artificial life and is killed by it, Dr. Tyrell is another Dr. Frankenstein; but there the similarity ends. He is punished not for breaking God's law, but for wronging his creations. And Roy -- robot, child, monster, demigod -- is not an obscenity to be returned to oblivion as soon as possible.

Setting aside for the moment the romantic subplot, there are two, parallel stories in BLADE RUNNER. Even though Harrison Ford is the star of the film, it is not Rick Deckard who is central to both. Roy Batty is the motive force of BLADE RUNNER. He controls much of the action, particularly the film's two climaxes. The first climax is the confrontation between Roy and Tyrell, after which Roy's purpose is spent. The second climax

comes with Roy's pursuit of Deckard through Sebastian's building.

Deckard's purpose in this sequence is clear: he first tries to kill Roy, then, failing that, to run away. Roy's purpose is not so transparent: Deckard thinks Roy is trying to kill him, but in the end Roy not only does not kill Deckard, but saves his life. Deckard has good reason to think Roy wishes him ill; he has just killed Roy's lover.

We must consider the context, however. Roy is returning to tell Pris she is as good as dead. Tyrell is dead, and there is no hope. Under these circumstances a swift death in battle might look like the best a warrior can hope for. And Roy may be glad Pris was spared the full knowledge of their defeat.

Do we have grounds for believing Roy actually wants Deckard to kill him? He gives Deckard back his gun, and a shot at him easy enough for Deckard to graze his head shooting left-handed. He sticks his head through the wall of the room in which Deckard is hiding, as though to offer it for another shot, saying, "You'd better get it up, or I'm gonna have to kill you." (By this time, of course, Deckard has lost his gun; but there is no indication Roy knows this.) His face lights up when he sees Deckard is pulling a pipe off the wall, and he lets Deckard try to brain him with it, twice, saying, "That's the spirit!"

When Deckard has climbed out on the ledge, Roy sticks his bloody head out of the window and announces cheerfully, "That hurt. That was irrational of you, not to mention unsportsmanlike." The only interpretation of this passage that does not contradict itself is: irrational to use a club when you have a gun; unsportsmanlike to leave prey wounded.

While all this is going on, Roy feels the onset of his "natural" death -- actually the planned obsolescence of the Nexus Six replicant -- but delays it by biting his hand, then driving a nail through it. Here as elsewhere BLADE RUNNER is equating life and pain. Through suffering Deckard ultimately gains redemption; Sebastian's building is his Purgatory, though watery instead of fiery (appropriately enough, he takes refuge in a bathroom), and high in the air instead of underground. And when Roy rescues Deckard, he lifts him with his nailed hand.

His other hand holds a white bird (we saw Deckard crash through a roomful of roosting pigeons earlier), which he releases as he dies. Religious symbolism, though more subtly done here, is one element BLADE RUNNER has in common with many other recent SF and fantasy films.

Why does Roy save Deckard's life? Deckard's narration gives one reason: because in those last moments all life was precious to Roy. More particularly, Deckard spitting in the face of Death cannot have failed to strike a chord. Deckard could never equal Roy in strength or speed, but he is his equal in courage, the

resolve to "not go gentle". There is another reason as well. Roy spends those last moments trying to communicate to Deckard those memories he holds dearest. He does not really succeed -- some of what he says is incomprehensible, at least to the audience if not to Deckard -- but even so Deckard is the only person in the world to whom Roy Batty is something more than a police dossier. It is not likely an android would believe in an after-life where good androids go. Roy Batty knows he will live on, if at all, only in Deckard's memories.

The contrast between BLADE RUNNER and other recent science fiction films is nowhere more striking than in its attitude toward death. Characteristically, recent SF films are marked by a denial of death. Consider SUPERMAN, in which time itself is turned back to save Lois Lane. Or THE RETURN OF THE JEDI, in which the dead heroes come to the victory party. Or THE SEARCH FOR SPOCK, in which Mr. Spock is regenerated from his corpse. In BLADE RUNNER, death is not only painful and sickening, it is permanent.

Why does Gaff spare Rachael? Clearly, Gaff regards Deckard as a rival, but there are indications as well that he admires him. Deckard is both what Gaff wants to become, and the major obstacle to his becoming it. Curiously, letting Deckard have Rachael serves both motives: it is a favor to Deckard, as well as a means of eliminating him from the running.

The final scene, in which Deckard and Rachael flee to the north, is not that well handled. Ridley Scott has said that he let the preview audiences, in effect, choose the ending. Inevitably they chose the "happiest" ending they could get.

That Rachael was created without the four-year limitation of the other Nexus androids is a surprise, but actually shouldn't be. She was given fake memories, Dr. Tyrell tells us, to stabilize her emotions and make her biddable -- in other words, to make the four-year lifespan unnecessary! If she died after only four years her experimental usefulness would be almost nil. However, this should have been hinted at earlier in the film.

More importantly, Deckard's attitude toward Rachael in the final scene lacks the ambivalence it had in the rest of the film, the mixture of attraction and repulsion. Both he and Rachael had been taught to believe beings such as she are subhuman; such attitudes may be overcome but they leave their mark forever. And he can never know she feels in the same manner as he feels. Of course, no one of us can ever know this about any other one.

And so Rick Deckard wins his small victory. The world is not changed by it. With or without Dr. Tyrell, the Tyrell Corporation will continue to make replicants, and blade runners will continue to kill them. But one life is saved.

Having said that Roy Batty is the motive force of BLADE RUNNER, we should not slight Rick Deckard. He performs the greatest possible act of moral heroism, far greater than merely to do good: to stop doing evil.

The ultimate lesson of BLADE RUNNER is something else. Consider this scenario: In World War II Berlin, a burnt-out Gestapo agent is called back to the force to hunt down a group of Jewish guerrillas who escaped from a slave-labor camp and killed a lot of German citizens in the process. His hunt is complicated when he finds himself falling for a beautiful Jewish girl who had been raised to think herself Aryan.

Of course, BLADE RUNNER is never this clear-cut, even at the end. However, to the extent that the replicants are like 21st-century Jews, both Deckard and the audience discover that they have been thinking about them like 21st-century Nazis. BLADE RUNNER asks the question, can we believe that something that looks human and acts human is not human? The answer is: yes. Under the right circumstances, we can all be Nazis.



#### BURN OUT

A killer I am,  
In spite of what I'm told.  
I've seen the light die  
In too many glazed "eyes";  
Too much spilled "blood";  
Torn "flesh",  
And shattered bone  
To convince myself they aren't alive.  
To believe that I haven't caused DEATH.  
How can I continue on in what I deny to others?

--Alyns Lawchilde



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### "THOUGHTS UPON WAKING IN THE MORNING" / Patricia D'Orazio

Rachael.

I know

That you wake in the night and cry.

I see the tears in the morning

Dried on your face.

And now you tell me that you feel  
What we have together is not as good  
As it could be, would be,  
If you were not empty inside.

I'm not good with words.  
How can I explain to you  
That I have seen real emptiness,  
That I have looked into a woman's eyes  
And seen a void  
That makes your empty womb a petty thing.

You're not empty.

You are full of life and love and sweetness.  
I see it in your smile of joyful pleasure  
When you look at something new.  
I feel it in your body,  
When you lean against me, so contented.  
I know it when you touch me.

And I feel  
Alive again.

"THOUGHTS UPON WAKING IN THE NIGHT" / Patricia D'Orazio

When we make love I feel complete.  
I feel full  
Of life and love and warmth,  
Of all the things Tyrell tried  
To deny me.

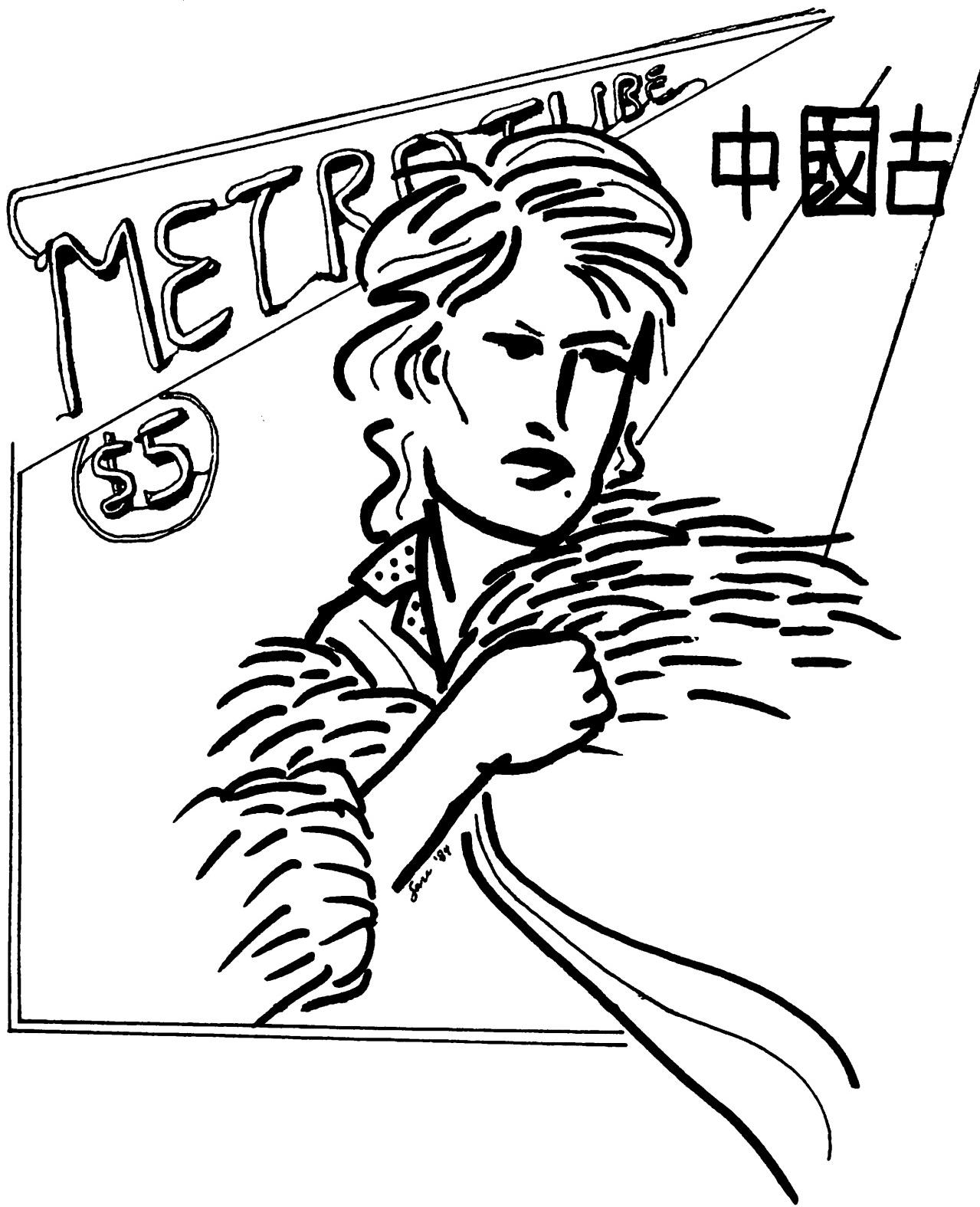
Yet sometimes,  
Afterward,  
I watch you sleep,  
Warm and heavy at my side  
And I weep.

I know I have given you joy  
And warmth and sweet release  
In equal measure to what you have given me.  
I can give you pleasure.  
Tyrell designed me well.  
But sometimes  
I feel it is not enough.

I feel as if I've cheated you.  
I took your seed  
With all its promise of new life,  
Your gift to me.  
But I have nothing inside  
To join with you.  
Nothing to create new life,  
Nothing but Tyrell engineering  
And the wasted promise  
Of your children.

And I feel  
Empty.





# the servant problem

peggy barilla

Jennifer pulled her too-large coat tighter and continued to stare through the store window. It was a wonderland of multicolored neon, laser effects and smoke, and shifting lights lending an illusion of sensuous movement to the mannequin that was its only decoration. It was a woman, dressed in a dark-purple gown, her brushy mane of hair an incandescent copper. Draped across a chaise, head thrown back, features convulsed in near-orgasmic rapture at the scent from the perfume bottle resting on one outstretched palm . . . of all the things Jennifer had seen since arriving in the city, she was by far the most wonderful.

Her eyes returned again and again to the elegant gown. So beautiful . . . Her own dress, like every dress she'd ever been given, was plain, modest, an undistinguished gray, inadequate to the raw weather even under her coat. She wasn't used to weather like this, uncontrolled and everywhere at once. As she gazed, one hand absently stroked a synthefur sleeve, and she smiled. It had been a going-away present, of sorts, and she had come to value it highly. It was hers. And someday, she would have a dress like that, too, one befitting the New World . . .

A commotion erupted in the crowd a few doors down, shouts and scuffling that made her look up in alarm. It ended as suddenly as it had begun, leaving her trembling and confused. Almost for reassurance she looked back to the window, to copper hair and wide green eyes, an expression of intense agitation. Her own reflection.

Jennifer shook her head, realising that she couldn't allow herself to become so preoccupied again. The street was dangerous, especially for one who had never before left the prescribed routines of home. She had heard the rumours, the speculations, but only now saw how little she really knew, how much could happen.

Stepping out from under the galleried overhang, she stood in the rain, looking up through it at lights and traffic, until the behaviour of passers-by sank in and she sought the inconspicuousness of a brisk pace, the coat's high collar turned up about her ears.

Pausing at an intersection, jostled by the crowd, Jennifer looked around, repeating the instructions she had been given and darting glances at all who came near her. Any one of them could be one of Those Men — how could she know, until it was too late? Then she spotted the blue-white light indicating the MetroTube station and started for it, brightening.

Over and over she recited the number of stops, the district names, how to pay the fare. Yes, she remembered everything, it was all very clear. Very like a recipe, she decided. And when she reached the end there would be someone who would take her to one of the Safe Places. Perhaps it would be a flat, and she could take care of it. She did that very well; it was her job. She could clean, and answer the door, and cook . . . especially cook. She did that best of all. That was how she'd gotten the idea to put the cleaning solvent in the casserole.

They'd never liked the taste of colony-produced protein, anyway.

At Stores, she had kept meeting other Sixes, and they had told her things, what to do. So, after she had cleared the table and straightened up, she had put them away to bed, and pulled the little wires at the back of the comm unit. She had picked out her going-away present from the bedroom closet, and very carefully locked the door behind her before beginning the first stage of her journey. She wondered, briefly, if anyone had found them yet. It would please the other Sixes not to see her at Stores that day; they would know.

Jennifer listened to the speaker announcement as the Tube slowed to a hissing stop. Making no sense of what was said, she double-checked the platform sign, scanning faces, wondering if it were really true, if any of those faces might belong to Those Men . . . No. It was all right; she saw someone signal from beside an escalator at the end of the platform, just the way she'd been told they would. He looked old. It would be interesting, learning about that.

It was . . . sad, she decided, working her way through the mob. Sad it had been necessary to do what she'd done. Mrs. Deckard and the little boy had always been nice.

But she couldn't be bothered about that anymore. Friends were waiting, and it was time to go.



# BLADE RUNNER

THE STORY OF  
RICK DECKARD

"LOS ANGELES,  
DECEMBER, 2018"

"CHRISTMAS IN  
THE BIG CITY  
JUST ISN'T WHAT  
IT USED TO BE."

"IT WASN'T SO BAD  
WHEN I WAS A KID...  
AT LEAST WE WERE  
IGNORANT ENOUGH  
TO FIND SOMETHING  
TO CELEBRATE."

"HUNTING REPLICANTS SORTA  
OPENS YOUR EYES FAST."

# WILL A SOUL SURVIVE

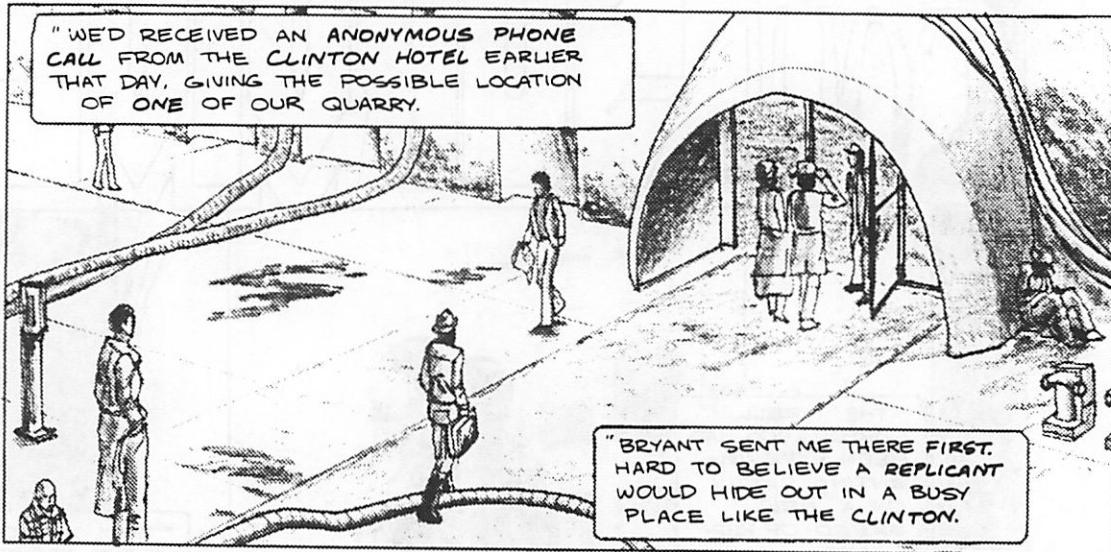
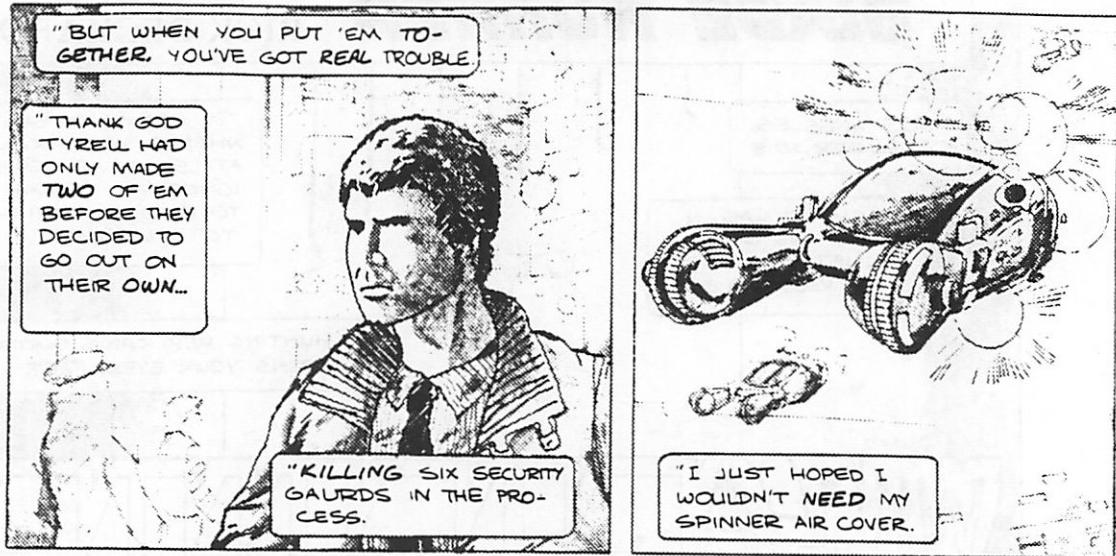
"THE TYRELL  
CORPORATION HAD  
BEEN EXPERIM-  
ENTING LATELY  
ON A NEW  
BREED OF REP-  
LICANT..."

"THEY CALLED  
IT THE NEXUS  
INFINITE."

"I DIDN'T LIKE  
THE SOUND OF  
THAT. REPLICANTS  
AND IMMORTAL-  
ITY ARE BAD  
ENOUGH ON  
THEIR OWN..."

STORY AND  
ART ©1985  
TIM ELDRIDGE

Based on characters and situations  
from the Ridley Scott Film, written by  
Hampton Fancher and David Peoples  
from a story by Philip K. Dick.



"OFF WORLD, YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN MOST'A THE TIME, SO THE GOOD PEOPLE AT TYRELL DIDN'T BOTHER TO DESIGN FEELINGS OF LONELINESS INTO THEIR "CONSTRUCTS"...



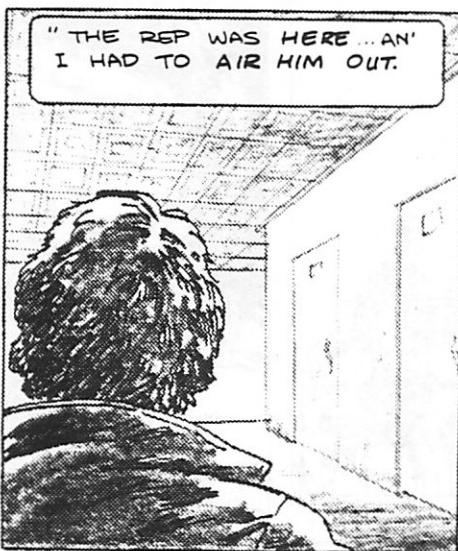
"I DON'T KNOW WHY THEY DECIDED TO START NOW."

"GUESS THEY DIDN'T HEAR REPLICANTS ARE OUTLAWED HERE ON EARTH."

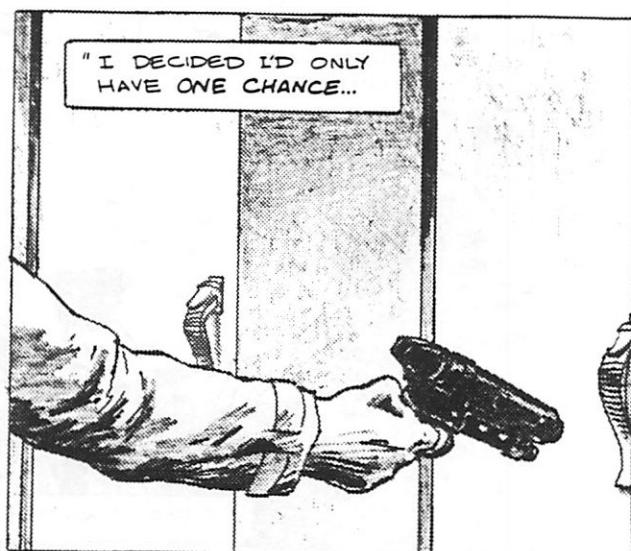
"BUT THAT DIDN'T MATTER."



"THE REP WAS HERE...AN' I HAD TO AIR HIM OUT."

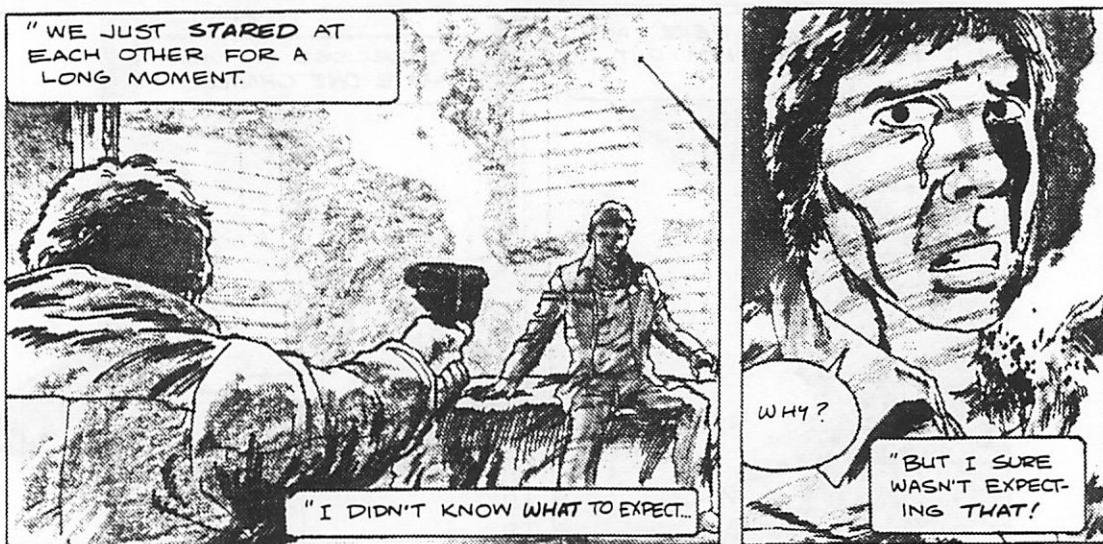


"I DECIDED I'D ONLY HAVE ONE CHANCE..."

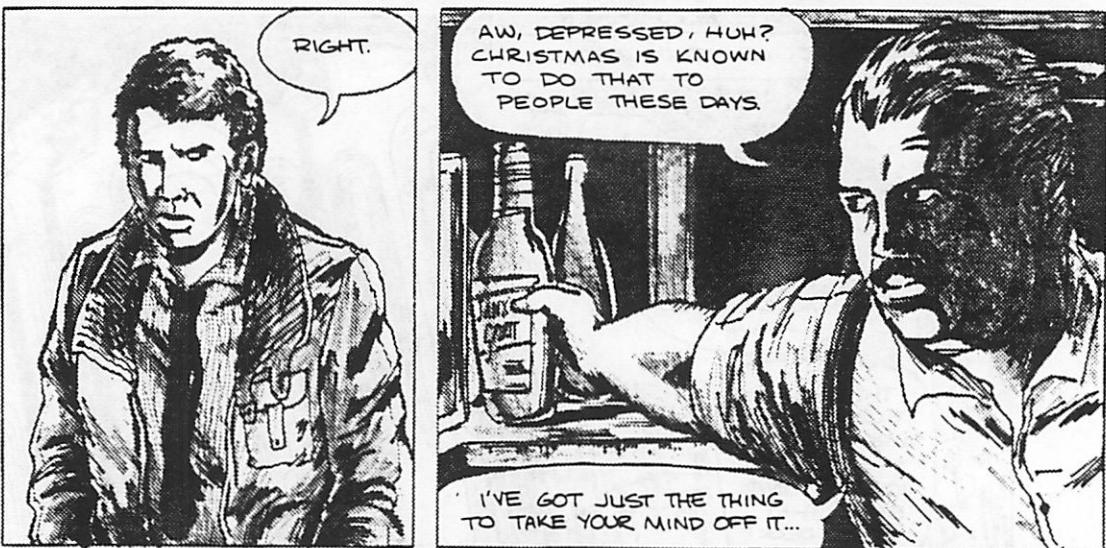


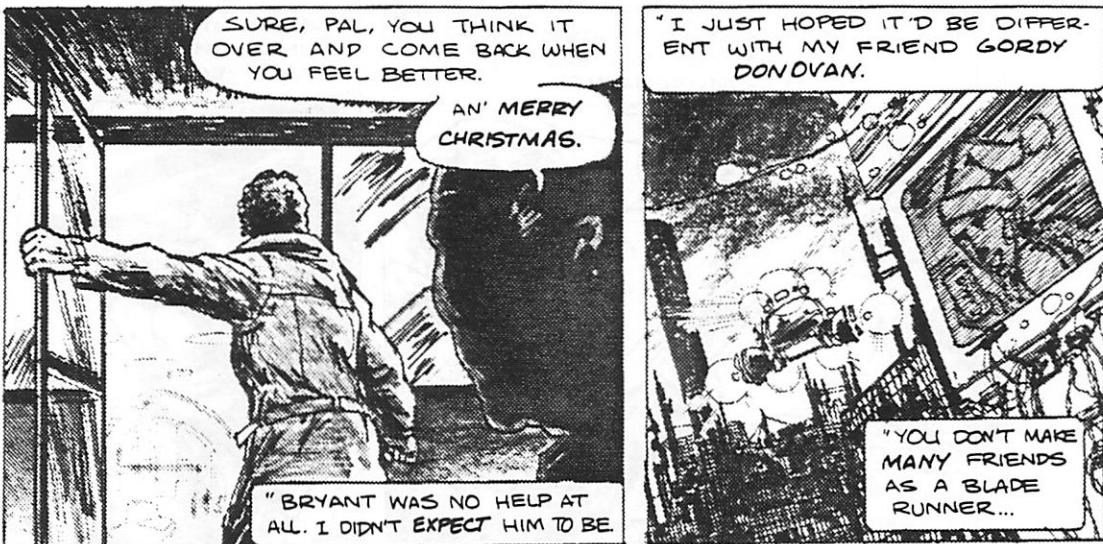
"SO I GAVE IT ALL I HAD."

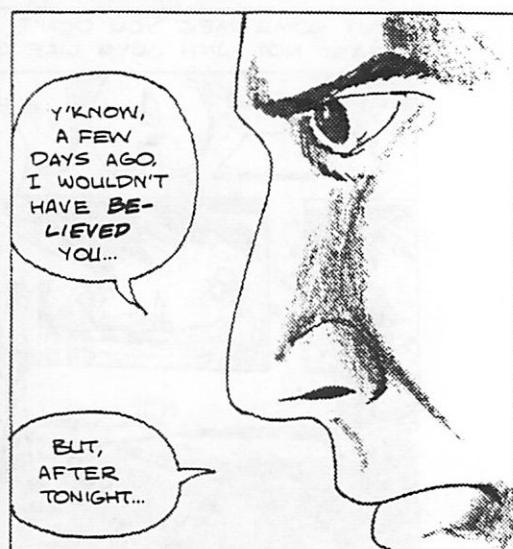
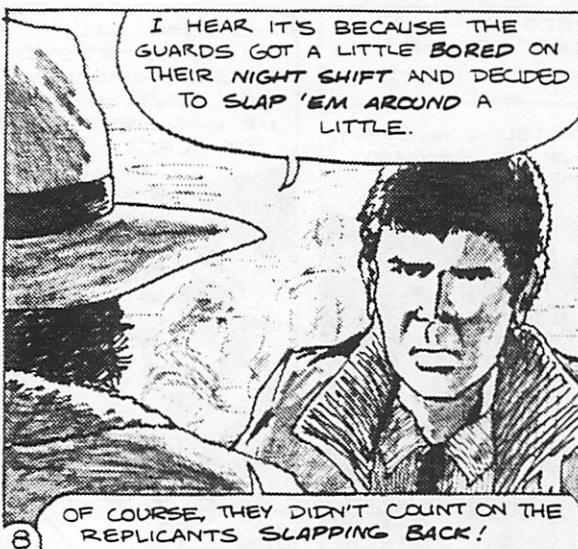
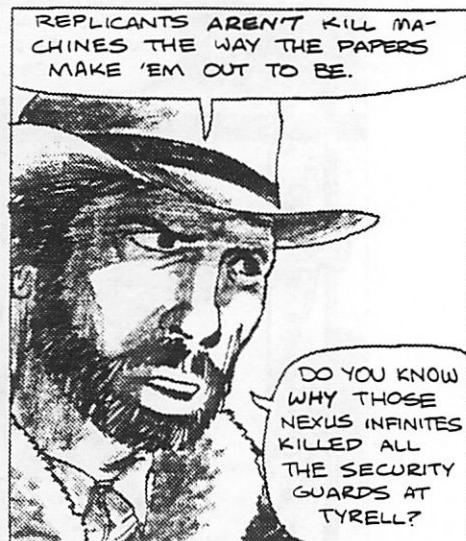
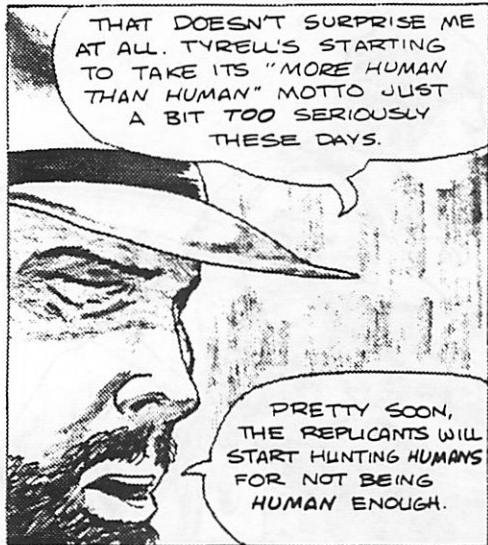




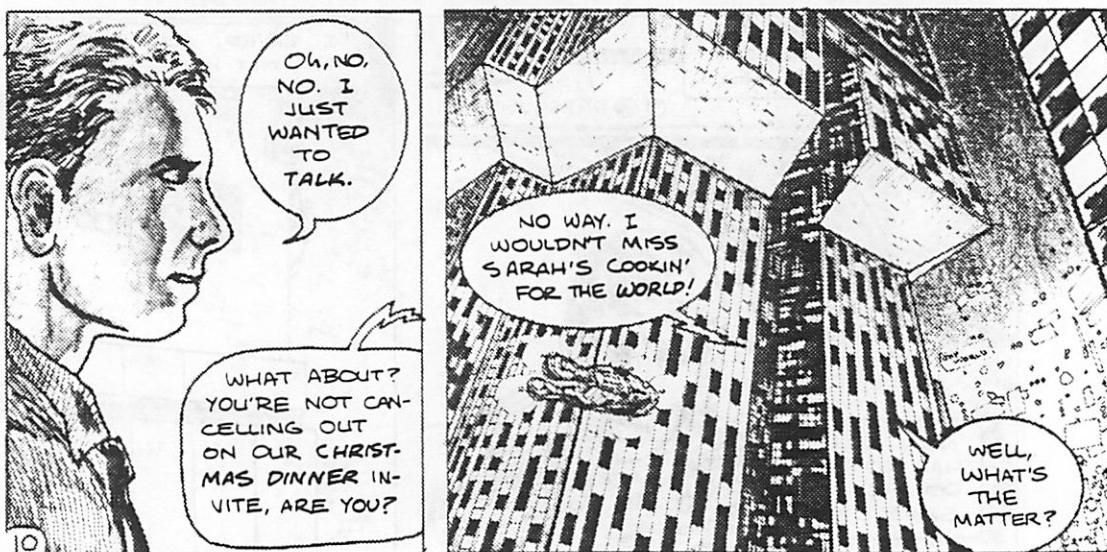
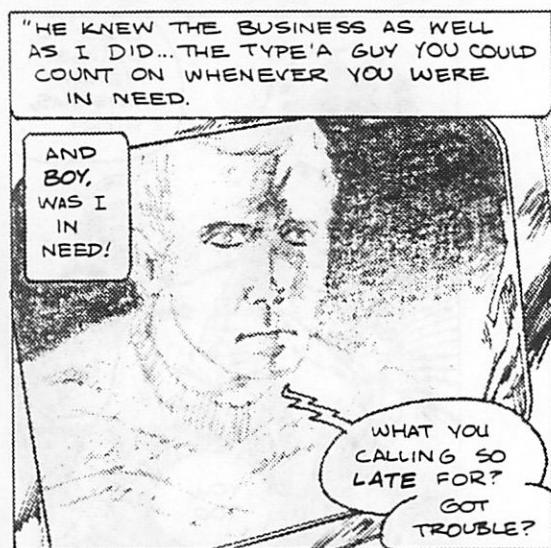
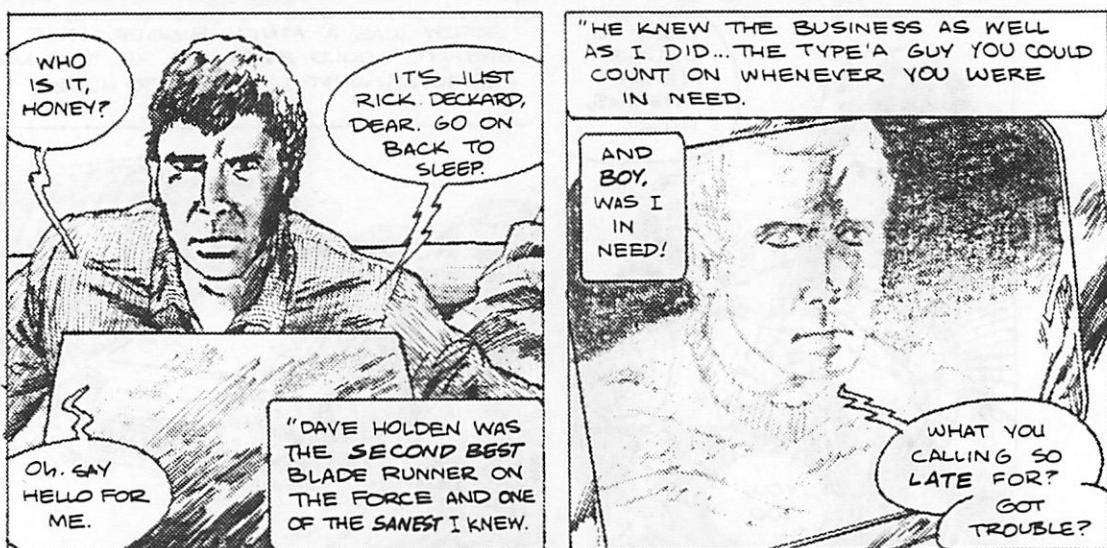


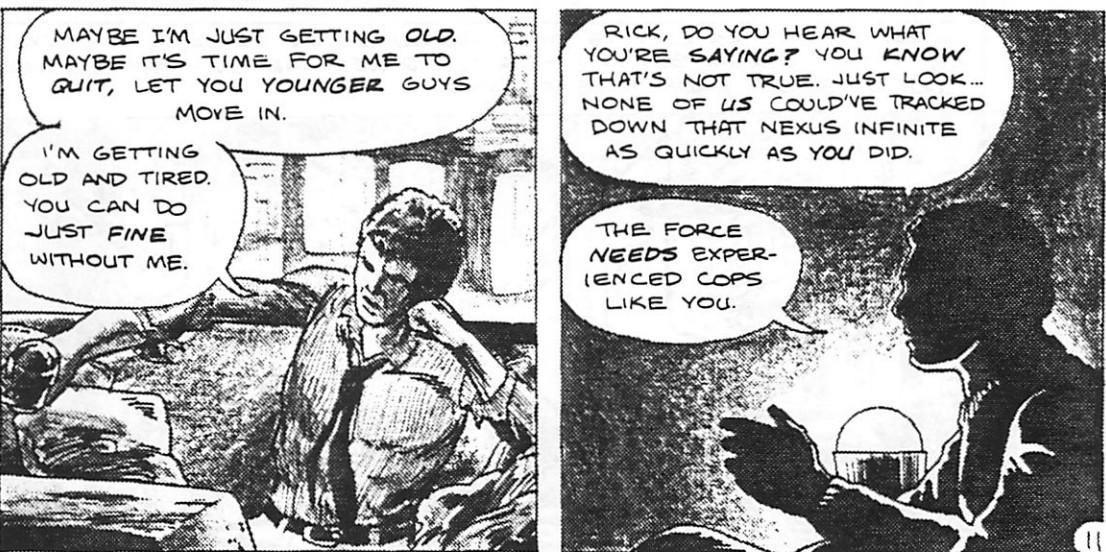
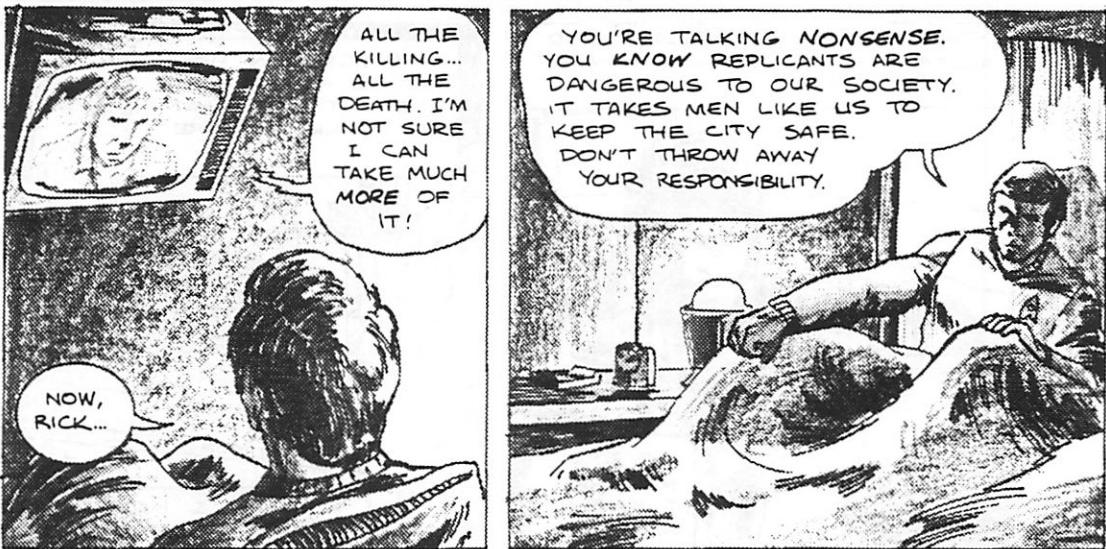
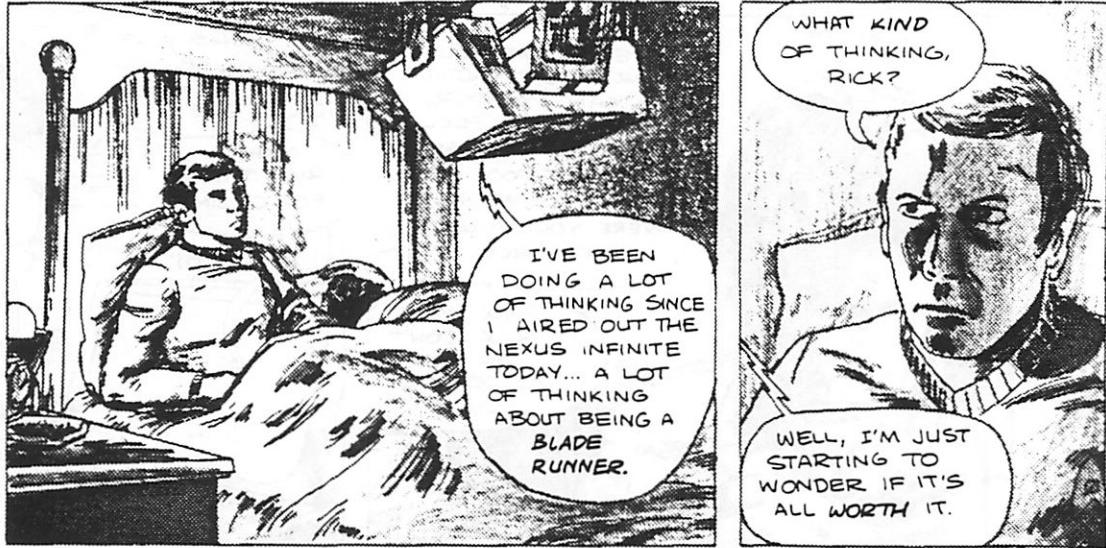


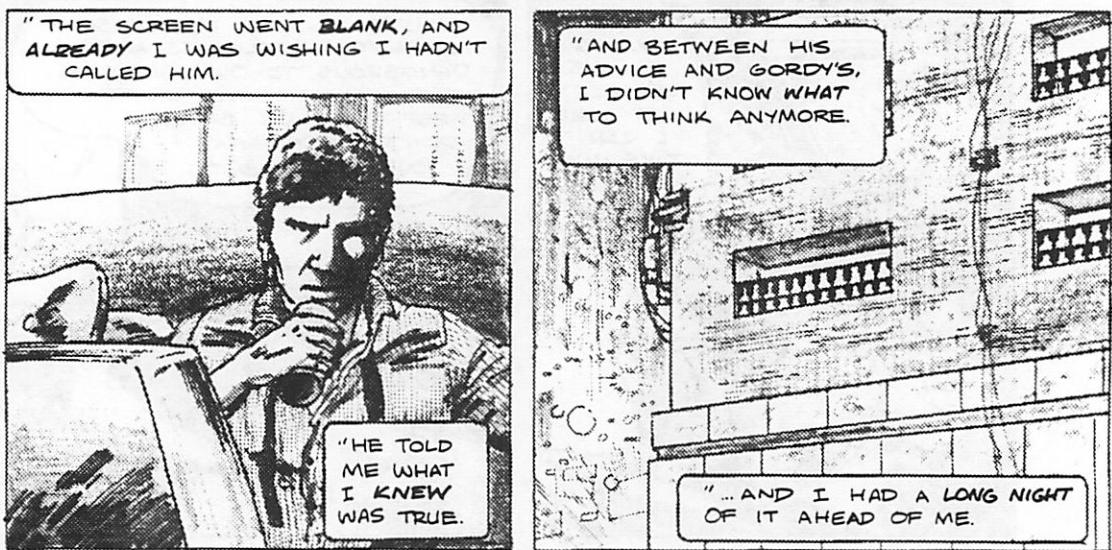
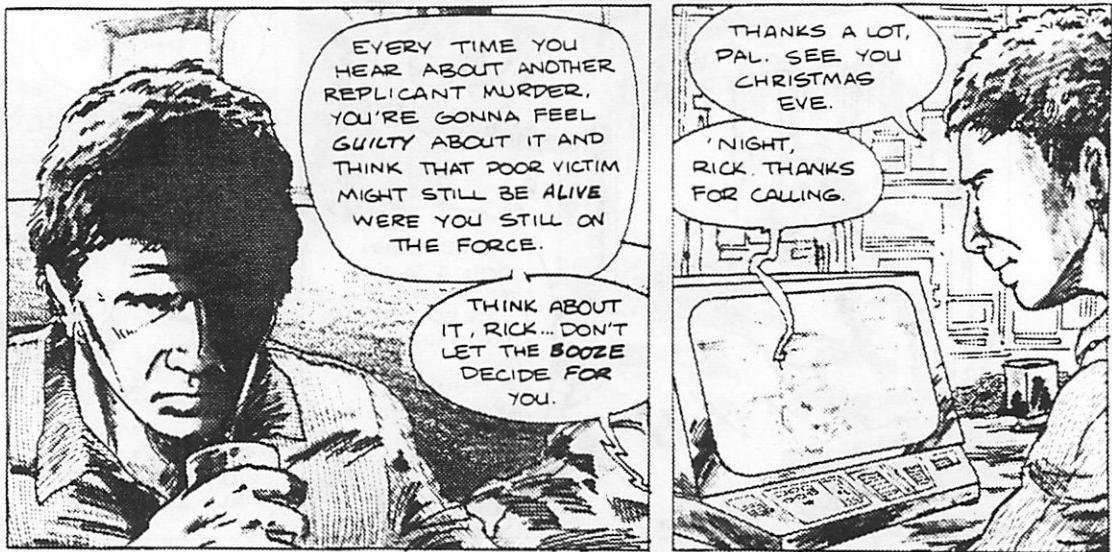






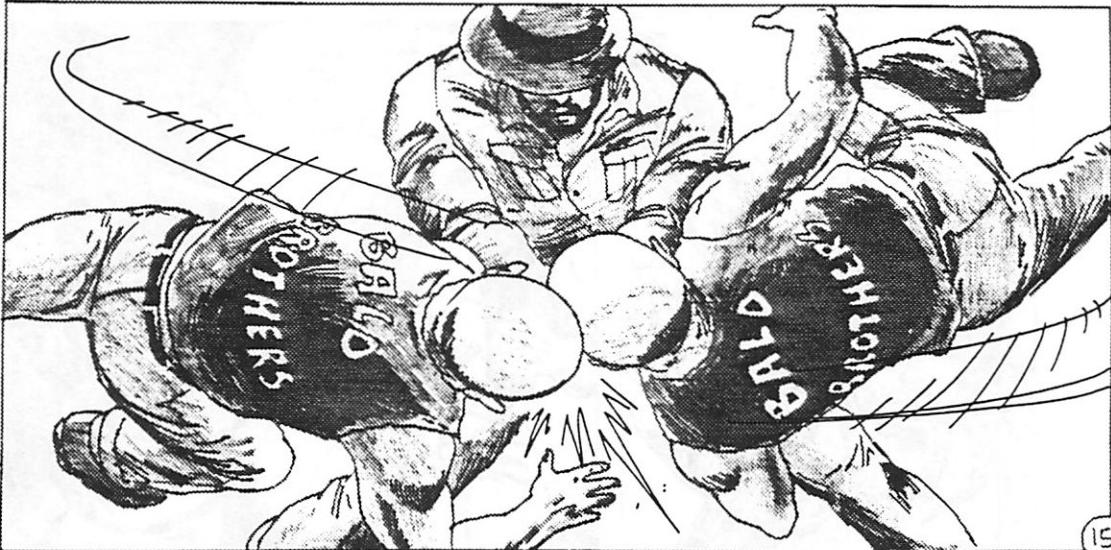
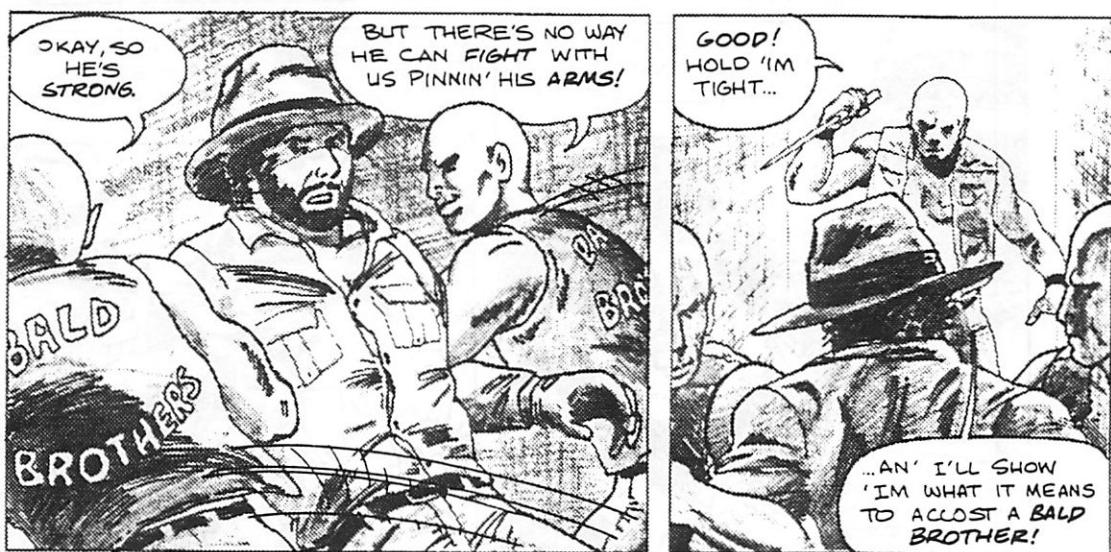
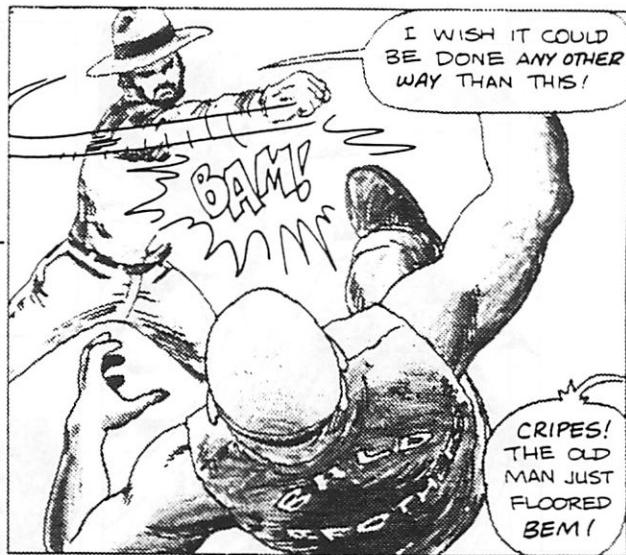
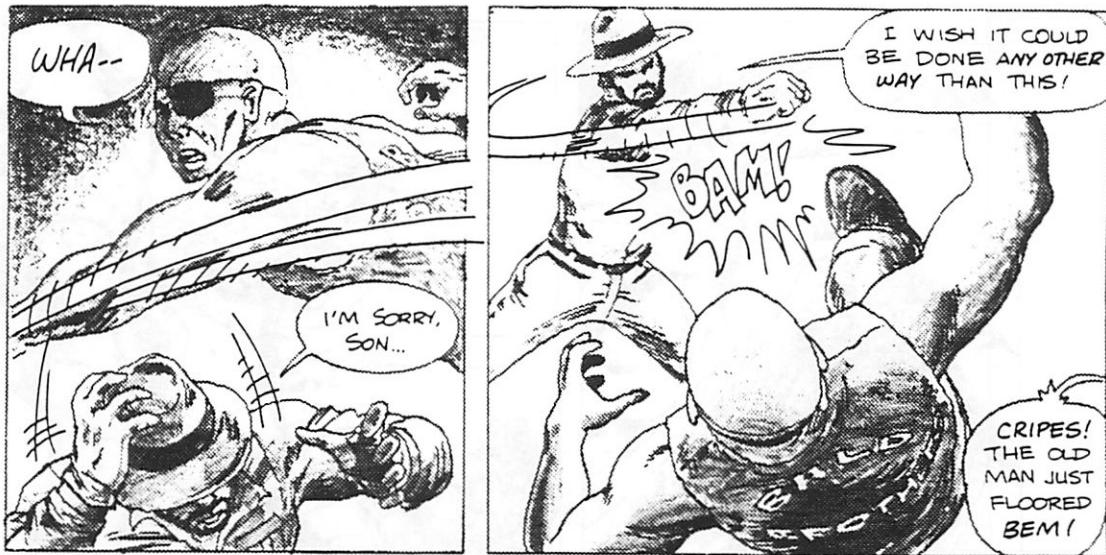


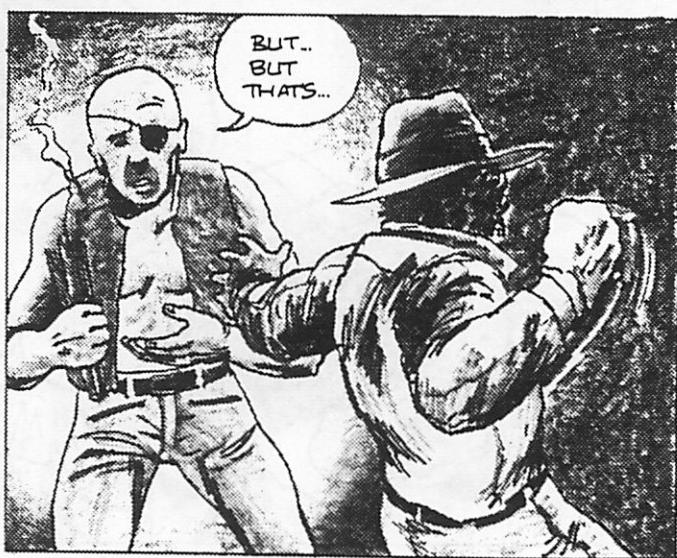
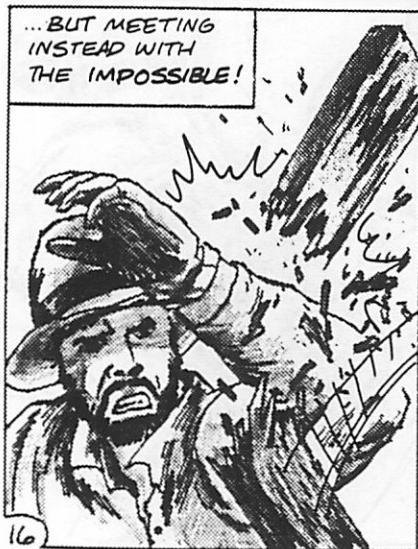


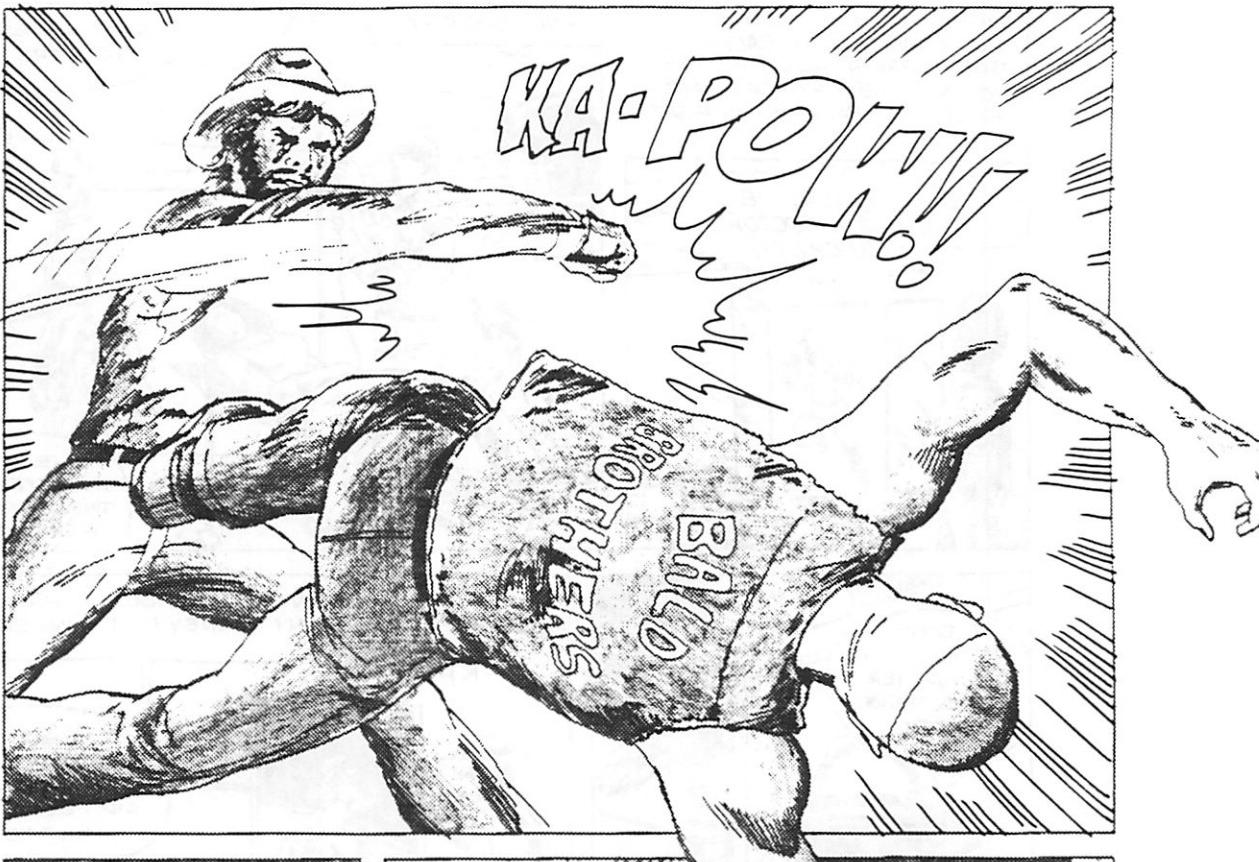




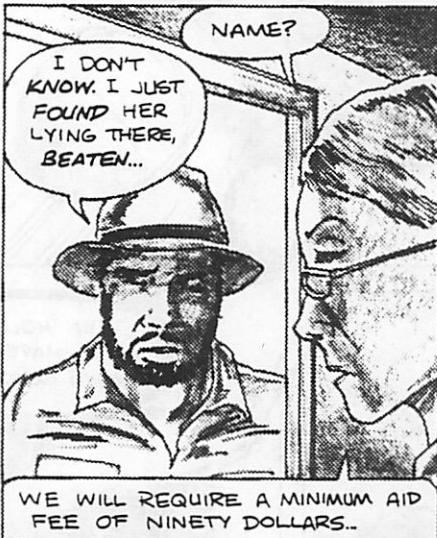








WITH THE DYING WOMAN IN HIS ARMS, GORDY RACES TO THE NEAREST HOSPITAL, IGNORING THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL PAIN OF HIS FIGHT.



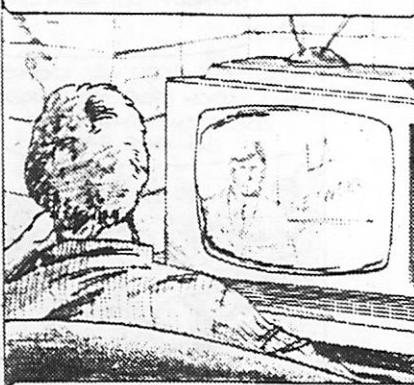


"ONE BOTTLE OF BOURBAN AND A CIGARETTE LATER, I GOT TIRED OF THINKING..."



"...AND DECIDED TO LOSE MYSELF IN THE WONDERS OF LATE NIGHT TELEVISION."

"ALL I COULD FIND WAS A NEWS SHOW... SO I STUCK WITH THAT."



"LATE NIGHT TV JUST HASN'T BEEN THE SAME SINCE CARSON DIED."

"THE NEWS WAS PUTTIN' ME TO SLEEP AS USUAL... UNTIL SOMETHING VERY INTERESTING CAME ON."

AND  
ON THE LOCAL SCENE...



A BLADE RUNNER EXCLUSIVE!

AT 10:38 THIS EVENING, A HORDE OF RENEGADE REPLICANTS MANUFACTURED BY THE NOKTAV CORPORATION OF MIDEAST RUSSIA WAS DISCOVERED HIDING OUT AT THE HOLIDAY INN SOUTH...

"POLICE FORCE HEADQUARTERS WAS NOTIFIED IMMEDIATELY AND A BLADE RUNNER SQUAD WAS QUICKLY DISPATCHED..."



"THE OUTLAW REPLICANTS WERE APPREHENDED AND PROMPTLY RETIRED AS SHOWN IN THIS ON-THE-SPOT FOOTAGE."



"I WAS... HORRIFIED!  
I COULDN'T BELIEVE  
WHAT I WAS SEEING!"



THIS IS  
WILLIAM STEWART  
COMING TO YOU  
LIVE FROM POLICE  
HEADQUARTERS.  
I'M HERE WITH  
CAPTAIN HAROLD  
BRYANT, CHIEF  
OFFICER OF THE  
BLADE RUNNER  
DIVISION OF THE  
LOS ANGELES  
POLICE DEPART-  
MENT, FOR A  
COMMENT  
ON TONIGHT'S  
NEWS.

"WE TAKE YOU NOW TO POLICE HEAD-  
QUARTERS FOR A LIVE REPORT."



CAPTAIN BRYANT, WHAT  
ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON  
TONIGHT'S RETIREMENT?



IT'S THE BEST DAMN  
CHRISTMAS PRESENT THIS  
CITY EVER GOT!

WE APPREHENDED EIGHT  
SKIN JOBS TONIGHT, AND THAT'S  
EIGHT LESS KILLERS YOU  
GOOD FOLKS WON'T HAVE TO  
WORRY ABOUT THIS YEAR!



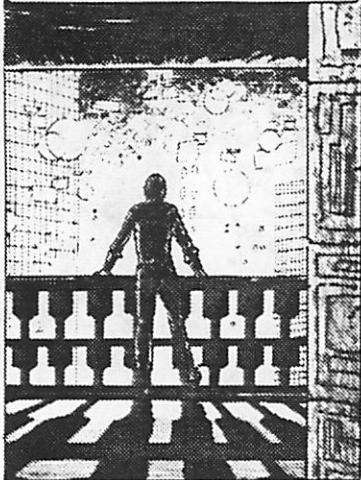
I'M REAL  
PROUD 'A  
MY BOYS  
TONIGHT.  
L.A. MAY  
NOT BE THE  
SAFEST  
CITY IN THE  
WORLD, BUT  
WITH THESE  
MEN ON THE  
JOB, IT WON'T  
BE LONG.

"THAT WAS ALL I COULD STAND."



"I HAD TO THANK  
BRYANT FOR BEING  
THE BIGOTED  
IDIOT HE IS..."

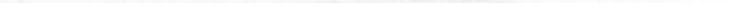
"...CAUSE HE'D JUST MADE UP MY MIND FOR ME.



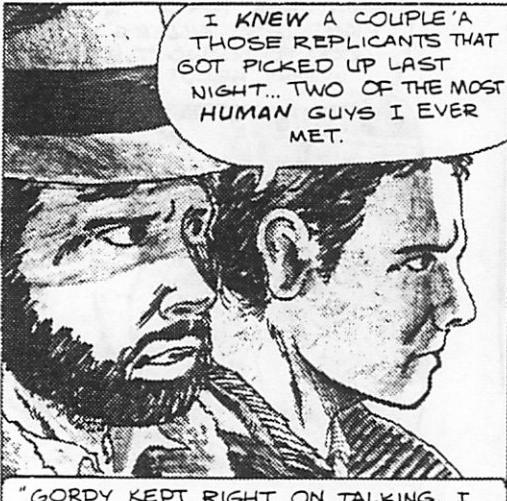
"THE NEXT MORNING, I MET UP WITH GORDY AGAIN, AND TOLD HIM MY DECISION...

YOU WERE RIGHT ALL ALONS, GORDY. THIS JOB IS INHUMAN AND IN-HUMANE.

OF COURSE I'M RIGHT, RICK...

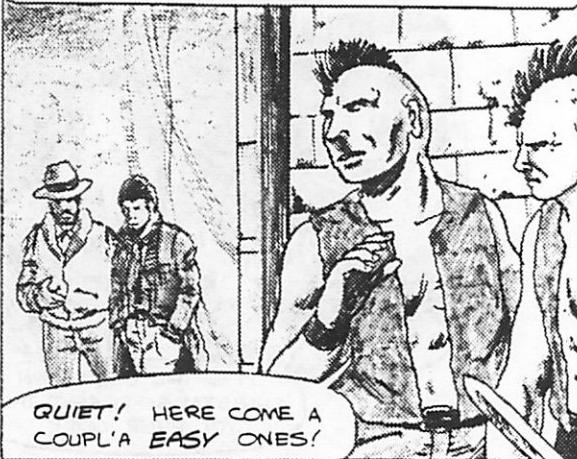


I KNEW A COUPLE'A THOSE REPLICANTS THAT GOT PICKED UP LAST NIGHT... TWO OF THE MOST HUMAN GUYS I EVER MET.



"GORDY KEPT RIGHT ON TALKIN'. I DIDN'T WANT HIM TO STOP.

"I JUST WISH I'D BEEN PAYIN' MORE ATTENTION TO WHICH NEIGHBORHOOD WE'D WANDERED INTO.



HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, FAGGOTS...

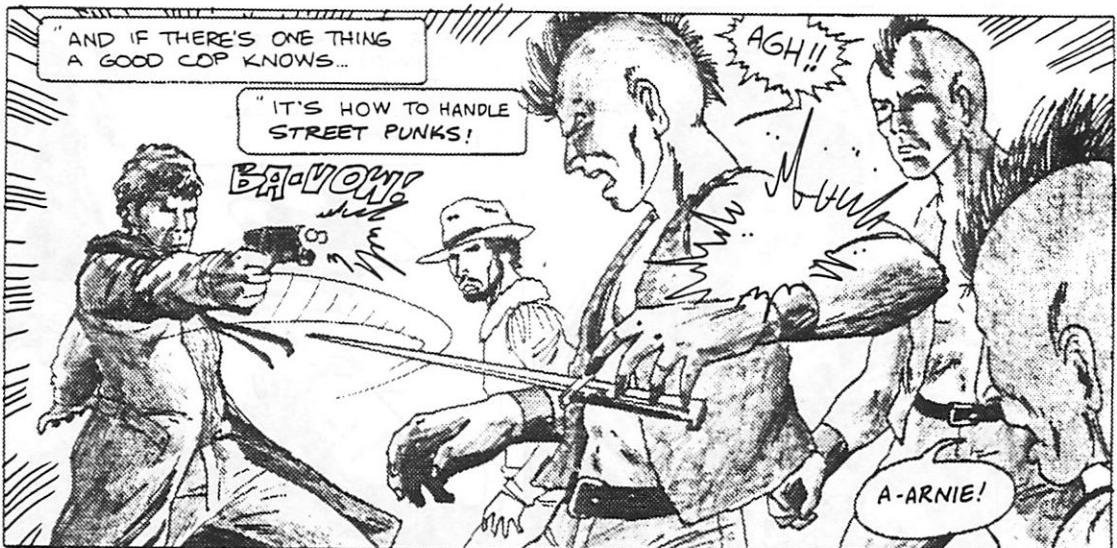
I TELL YOU, REPLICANTS AREN'T HALF BAD. JUST IF SOCIETY WOULD ACCEPT THEM FOR WHAT THEY--



22

...UNLESS YA WANT A COUPLE MORE BREATHIN' HOLES.

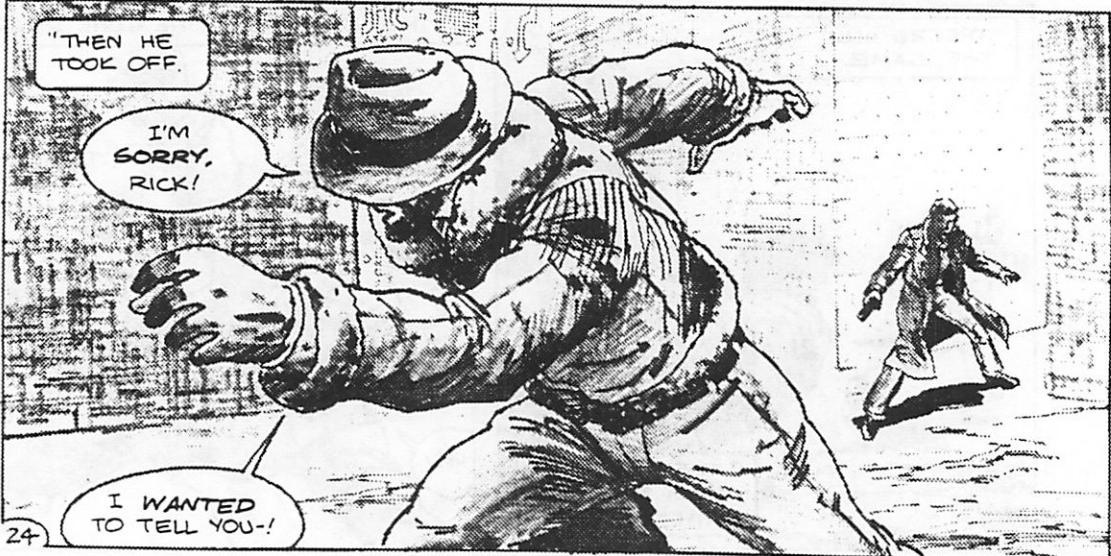




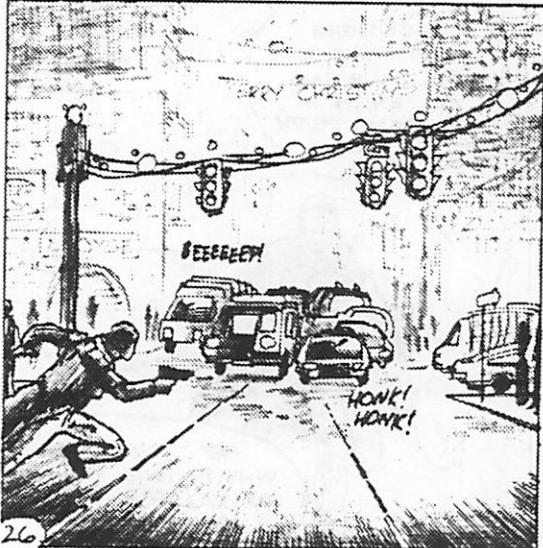
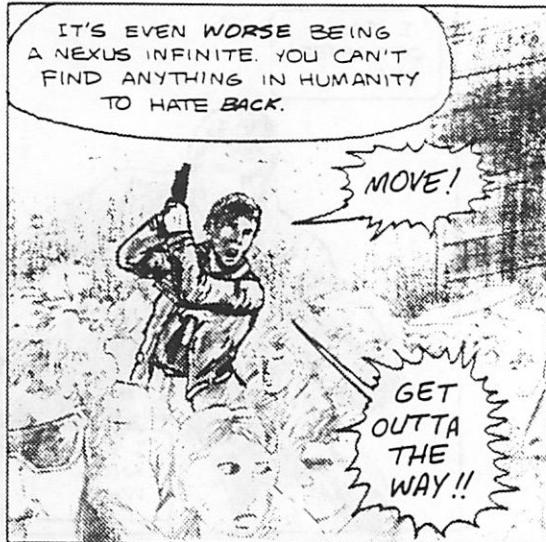


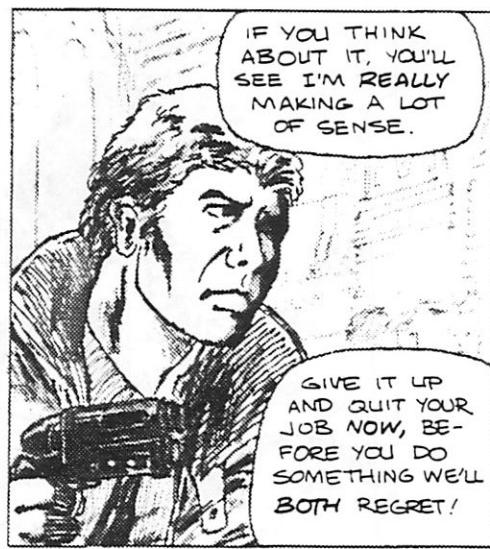
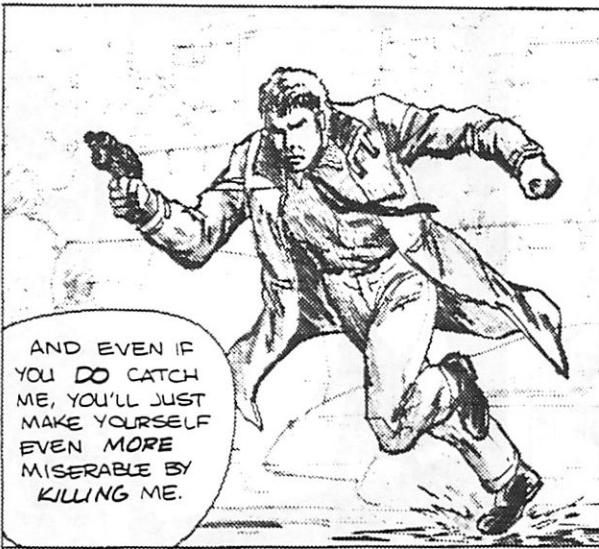
I'LL... SURVIVE.

"THAT'S WHEN  
I SAW IT."

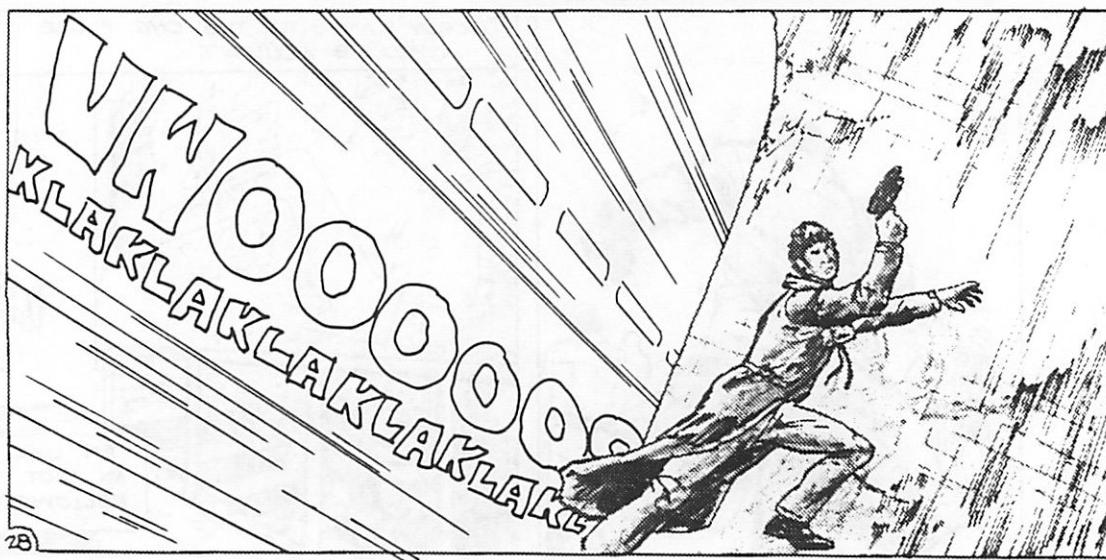
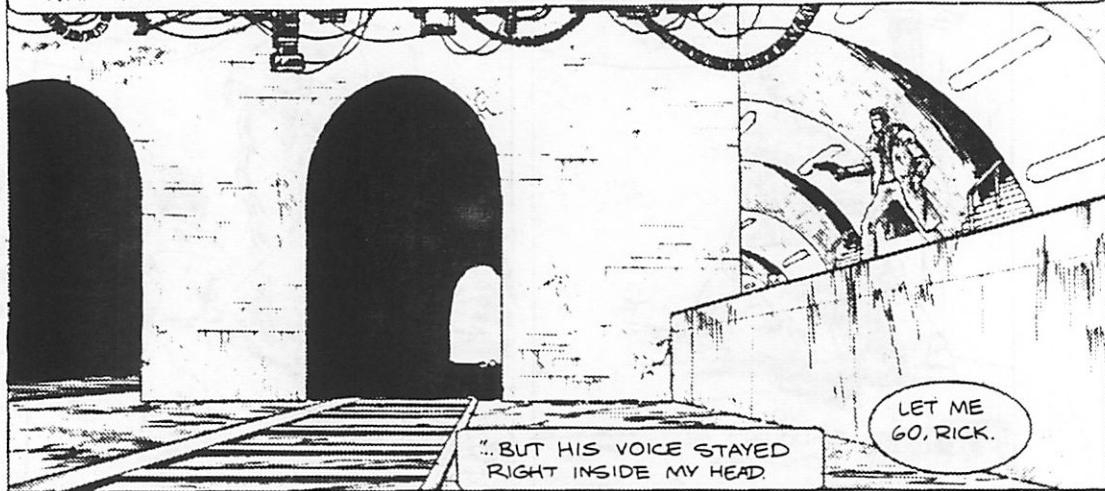


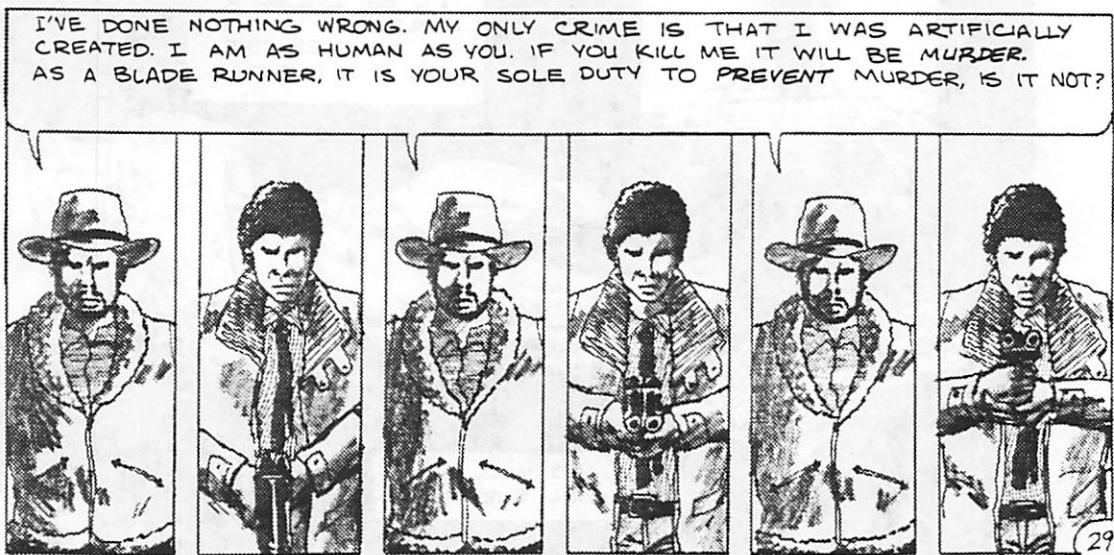
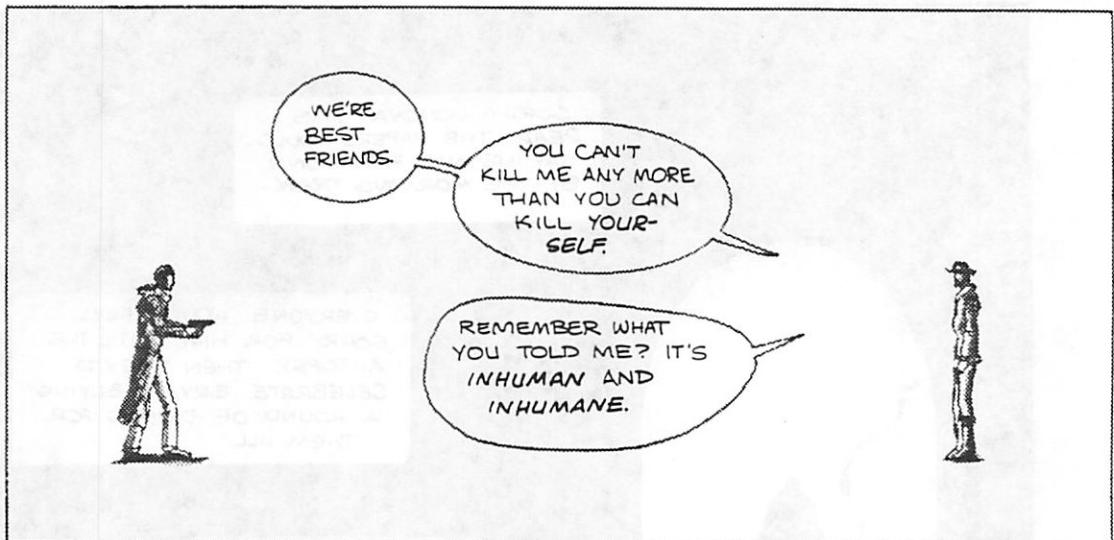
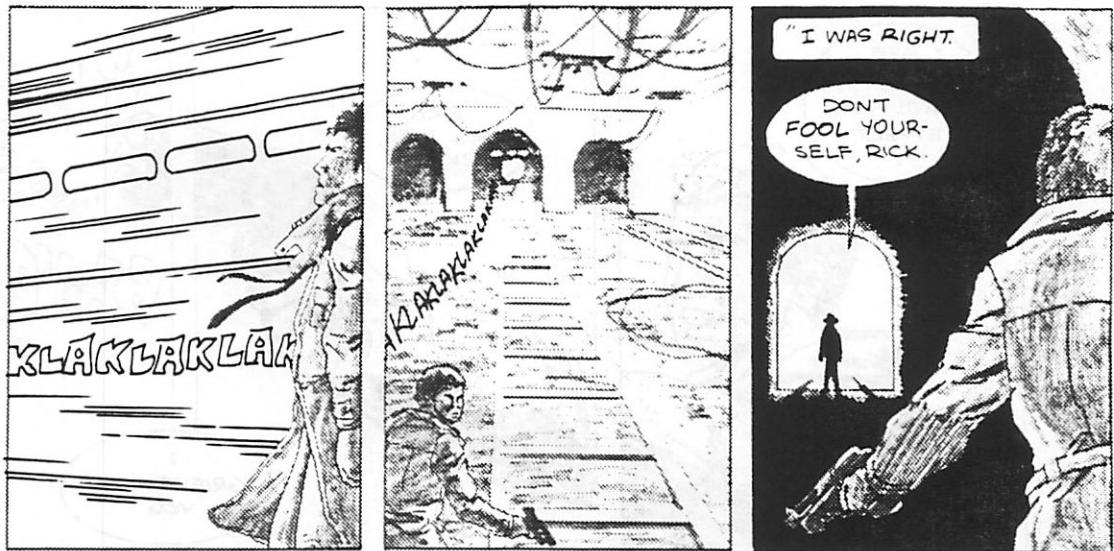




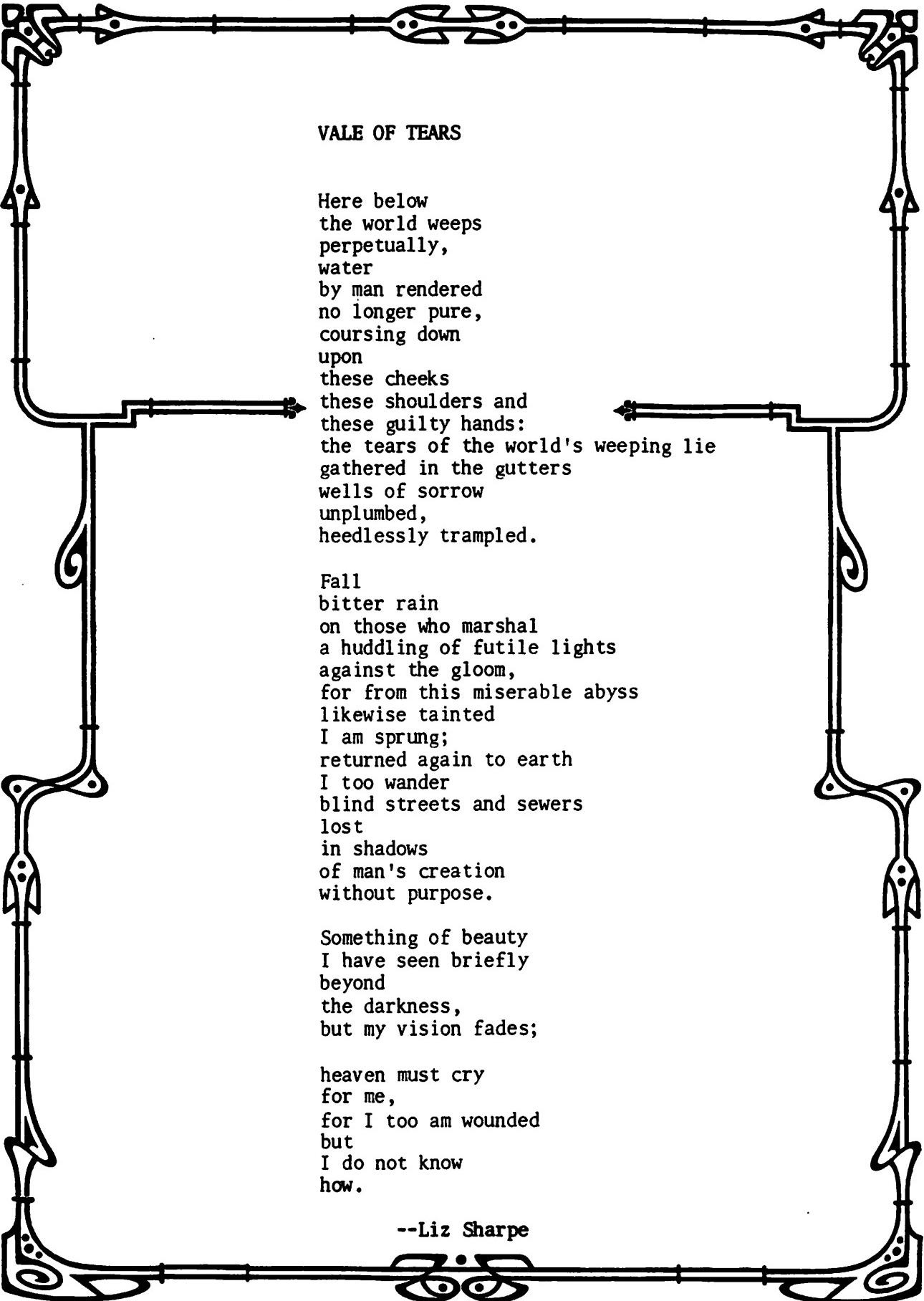


"IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE I LOST HIM IN ONE OF L.A.'S THOUSANDS OF SUB-WAY TUNNELS..."









### VALE OF TEARS

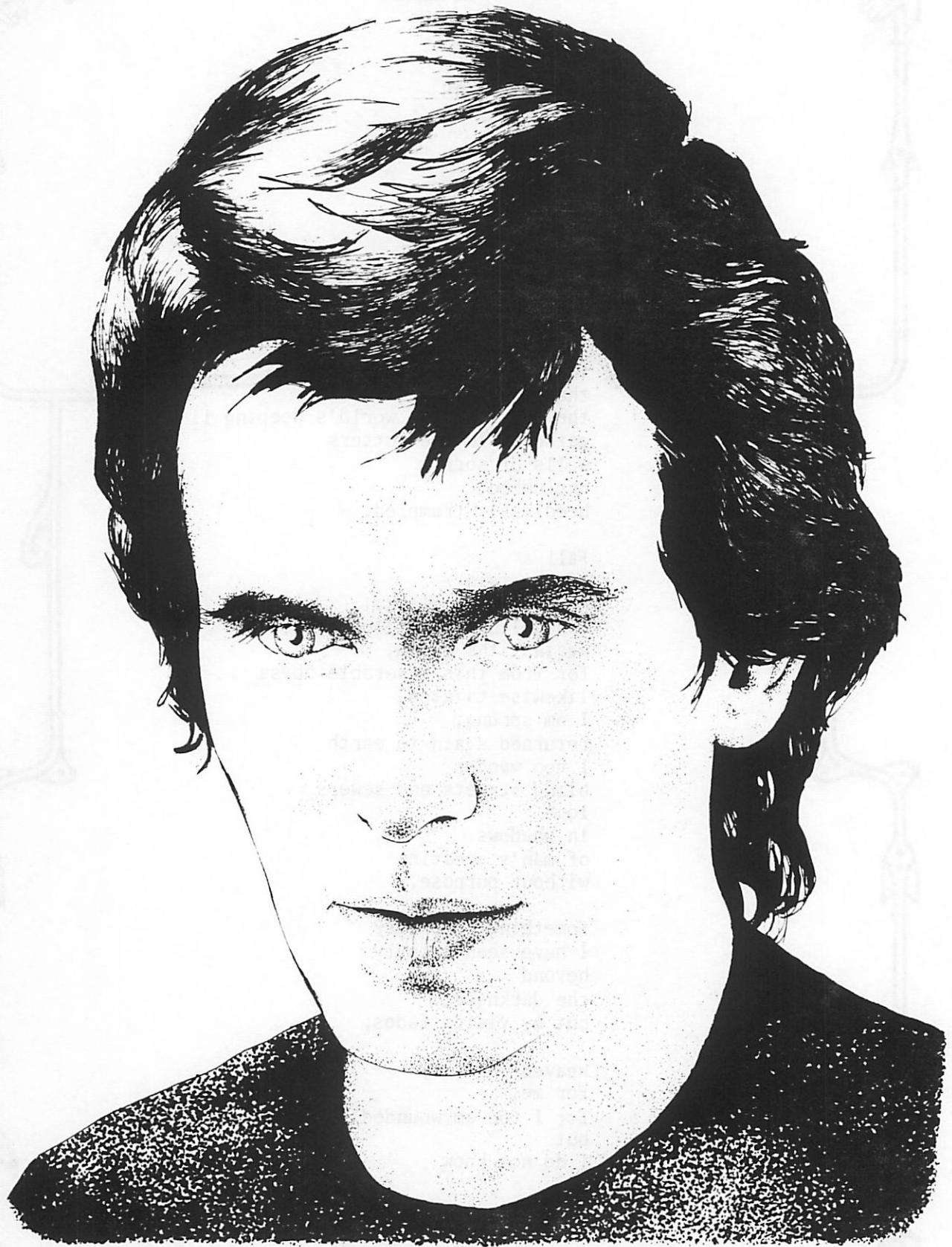
Here below  
the world weeps  
perpetually,  
water  
by man rendered  
no longer pure,  
coursing down  
upon  
these cheeks  
these shoulders and  
these guilty hands:  
the tears of the world's weeping lie  
gathered in the gutters  
wells of sorrow  
unplumbed,  
heedlessly trampled.

Fall  
bitter rain  
on those who marshal  
a huddling of futile lights  
against the gloom,  
for from this miserable abyss  
likewise tainted  
I am sprung;  
returned again to earth  
I too wander  
blind streets and sewers  
lost  
in shadows  
of man's creation  
without purpose.

Something of beauty  
I have seen briefly  
beyond  
the darkness,  
but my vision fades;

heaven must cry  
for me,  
for I too am wounded  
but  
I do not know  
how.

--Liz Sharpe



## MEMORIES OF GREEN

### DECEMBER 2019

It was still dark.

A high wind was rattling past the hollow old building. Willy Soledad raised his head and listened. Only the wind -- and passing spinner traffic which lit the greasy windows with sporadic flashes.

Once, he supposed, this had been some sort of warehouse, before the bad times. Now it was in Three Sector, the worst. Still, it made for good enough shelter. Anonymous shelter. They might not look for him here.

The dregs of last night's rain dripped scantily through the shattered skylight above, pooling on the splintered and rotten floorboards.

Willy Soledad squatted on his haunches by a small smoky fire which fizzled atop two concrime blocks in the middle of the room. His dark eyes glittered. He was staring at Old Man.

Old Man was a stranger. He was as anonymous to Soledad as this shelter was. Still -- he was interesting. Soledad had never seen anything like him before. Old Man was drabbling a spoon back and forth in his garbage soup. His face was a slack, bewildered mask; his rheumy gaze wandered vaguely. "I thought you'd forgotten me," he mumbled feebly, over and over. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

Soledad wondered who Old Man was talking to, who he was waiting for. He seemed unaware of Soledad, and Soledad could hear and feel that they were most certainly alone in the hollow old warehouse.

Yes. Old Man waited for someone.

"I thought you'd forgotten me."

Still staring, Soledad took a bite of the apple in his hand. Woody and bitter. They made better ones Offworld.

The dying fire threw vivid patches of light on his features -- the high cheekbones, straight nose, black hair, black eyes tilted almost to almond shape.

Dark eyes, vivid and bleak. The guarded, rawboned features of one who rarely said anything, flickering in the light and the dark.

Old Man had faltered silent. Now he stared into the failing fire, slopping his breakfast with a steel spoon.

Soledad stood, took another bite of his apple, and wandered over to a nearby window. It was getting lighter out -- he could tell that even through the age-grimed window. He unhooked the iron latch atop the rickety frame and slid the window open, and deftly pulled himself up to sit on the ledge.

He could tell it was nearly dawn because the rain had slackened up and he could see the sooty-black eastern sky turning a sullen shade of violet. The sun might actually show through today, depending on the winds. On such occasions it looked like a scarlet ball, an angry eye in the sky.

Willy Soledad had seen the sun under different circumstances. He had seen it bright and huge-blazing against the deep emptiness of space. He had seen it remote, small, almost a star like other stars, from various Offworld colonies.

He didn't mind the cloud-cover here, though. He liked weather. (The dirt and grit of the city always annoyed Zhora, and thunder made Pris edgy; Roy Batty, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by rain. He liked the noise it made against the pavement.)

A bird flew up close to the window and landed on the ledge. It began to strut up to Soledad, peering this way and that with its pebble-shiny eyes. It was a white bird with silver-flecked wings; Soledad guessed that it was called *pigeon*. He had a knowledge of that word. He'd seen a few of them before, and he'd wondered where they might dwell in a city like this.

An odd idea occurred to him: Was this *pigeon* thing natural, or was it constructed, like Zhora's snake?

He grinned. He could picture a city full of faked wild pigeons. Maybe the rain would cause this one to short-circuit . . . unless it had decent insulation? The more he toyed with the idea, the funnier it seemed. He thought of coaxing the bird closer for a proper look. Maybe food. What did birds eat? If it were fake, would it want to eat? Tentatively, he extended an index finger to it -- and it flew off.

Soledad leaned against the windowframe, and wondered where the others were — his companions, his brothers and sisters. What were they doing now? When would he hear from them — would it come as a *push* from the Voice? Had Batty tracked down that vague reference in the Dominguez files to "TYRELL CORP"? Soledad hoped he would not be left out. Because there was the Voice to bind them all together . . . the Voice and shared knowledge, shared danger, and The Death.

The Death was creeping up on him, he knew. He could not feel it now, of course. But one day The Death would come for him, from somewhere inside of him, mysterious and unstoppable. He had seen it happen many times at Dominguez.

Without warning it took over your body -- sometimes quietly, sometimes with terrible convulsions -- and in a matter of hours, sometimes even minutes, you were dead.

That was The Death.

A strange feeling, knowing your fate and yet not knowing it. But he could have known; he'd had the chance. He had refused it.

He remembered -- Emma's quick fingers at the computer keyboard -- hurrying, hurrying -- unable to get the fetch-code. Oddly, it is a mute terminal, an antique, a mutie in a place like Dominguez. It is almost funny. Time is limited -- an alarm klaxon has begun to roar somewhere down the corridor outside. He remembered -- Batty taking over; Batty could coax almost anything out of a machine. And suddenly, like a burst, the files come onto the screen, marching past in sequence. Batty stares at the screen and smiles; "It's you," he says to Soledad. "Look."

Soledad steps back. "No."

He wants to look, he wants to, and there it is, hard-fought-for, maybe never to be had again, and Batty looking at him with those sharp, light eyes -- "Why not?"

"No . . . you look," Soledad says. "I'll watch the door." The sight of that mutie screen gives him a sharp pang of unease.

Zhora has already been posted at the door, but Batty doesn't argue. No time for that. Batty speeds through the file, rapidly studying it; document after document flashes by under the combat leader's scrutiny. Scientific studies, background, information, all sorts of useful things. However, not everything they want is there: Soledad's file is been the only individual's file Batty could find, that and a fragment concerning Leon's incept date. Batty looks thoughtfully at Soledad's file again, then does something to several keys that makes the screen flicker. Batty glances at Soledad: "It's erased now." Panic: "What? You took it away?" Yes, he'd nullified Soledad's file at the source. It is lost forever. "One thing," Roy Batty says, with an almost gentle smile on his fierce warrior-face, "they can't have."

Soledad smiled at the memory. That was typical of Batty, to wipe out Soledad's entire history without saying anything. Or without asking. It infuriated and frightened Soledad, that this thing no longer existed; yet he could not help grinning. Roy Batty, however cryptic, always had his reasons.

Soledad trusted Batty. Roy Batty was the fiercest and wisest of their kind; he'd led them all out of Dominguez, had kept them alive here. He must have seen some reason to cancel Soledad's files. And he must have figured some overriding importance in sending Soledad off.

Yet it felt like the worst exile to Soledad.

He remembered them, he remembered them all -- Zhora's abrupt laugh, Pris' small, ragged voice, Leon's way of tilting his head when he was puzzled, and Batty -- everything about Batty.

And Emma -- Emma Ripley. His memories of her were painful in intensity. Her long dark hair, her large bitter eyes, the determined set of her mouth. Her sudden jolting shriek as the energy gate took her, at Tyrell Corporation.

Willy Soledad found himself trembling violently. He clenched his hands together.

*If they go, like Emma, I will rip out the guts of whoever does it to them.*

Being gone like this was worse than slavery. The old fears were replaced by terrible fantasies of being the only one left.

The only one.

But then after all it was his fault. His idea. He'd been sure that there were other replicants, other Sixes, in the city. A chance encounter with a stranger on the street had been enough to convince him. "They're somewhere here," he'd told Batty. *Batty, amused at first -- "Where?" "I don't know. Maybe to the north, in Three Sector. I went to Three Sector today and -- "*

*Batty, smiling: "Go there. Just you. And don't turn back, not unless you hear from me."*

What puzzled Soledad -- now crouching on his window-ledge, staring into the smut-choked sky, his oddly-tilted dark eyes glinting almost hungrily -- was that, though Batty obviously had thought Soledad's idea of some alternate replicant-nest doubtful, he'd suddenly taken him up on it. Soledad had been left with no choice but to go. It was final. Batty had received all objections coldly, silently.

There was a bond that all of them shared and would never, not ever, betray. It was a part of them. It was the Voice.

A breeze ruffled Soledad's dark hair. Behind him in the twilight gloom Old Man began to murmur again in an endless round.

"I thought you'd forgotten me," Old Man quavered.

Soledad knew that what he'd really obeyed was not the command to leave, but the smile behind it. As though this were another game, or some joke known only to Batty.

Roy Batty always had his reasons.

Still . . . Soledad wished he could know what was happening.

\* \* \*

\* \* \*

This is the file Batty saw. This is the history of Willy Soledad.

NEXUS 6 (M) Des: Soledad (Willy)  
N6MAB100618  
Incept Date: 6 Oct, 2018  
Phys: Lev A Ment: Lev B  
Info programme #387749/t series  
Function: Remote construction of orbital platforms/stations,  
outer colonies  
Programme duration 7.25 days, supr./@ Dr. Gustav C. Nash, Los  
Alamos branch

t-series programmes developed in part by grants from Bell & Howell,  
Con-Am and Warner Communications; reference Nash, Gustav C.,  
file #005899327

10 Nov 2018:  
Info. programme completed.  
Subject alert, lucid.  
Highly responsive.

Present on active status during construction of Shimata 16-006  
facility.

22 March 2019:  
Subject alternately confused and hostile.  
Apparent escape attempt @ Shimata, 19 March.

13 Aug 2019:  
Periods of apathy and severe withdrawal.  
Failure of function.

Sept 2019 Update:  
Function abandoned.

Transferred to Dominguez facility.  
Purpose: study subject, Tyrell/Con-Am Nexus Program Review  
Project (NPRP)

Cancellation of unit under consideration.

And so on.

That was the file Roy Batty erased.

## 2.

Hanging around the police morgue with Bryant was Gaff's least favorite duty.

For one thing, the place smelt sour, like chemicals. And it was cold and forbidding --- steel walls and NO SPITTING signs everywhere. For another thing, standing around supervising the disposal of dead freaks and skinjobs wasn't Gaff's idea of action.

Still, he wasn't working for free, and as long as Bryant understood that -- there were worse things Gaff could be doing.

He leaned against a corridor wall (right next to a NO SMOKING, NO LOITERING sign) and idly watched Bryant light up a stogie. The division captain seemed to relish this -- checking up on the identities and fates of his "cases". Seeing the whole thing through to the end. That was his idea of efficiency -- see the freaks up the chimney and you've really done the job.

Bryant seemed in a peculiarly jubilant mood at present. A couple of hours ago, the news had come down that production of the entire Nexus line had been halted at Tyrell Corp by court order. The captain took the news as a kind of personal triumph.

Bryant drained his cup of ersatz (the fifth he'd had this morning), crumpled the imitation styrofoam container and let it drop to the green-tiled floor. "Christ, Gaff," he sighed, "this job's been a killer, a real killer. Glad it's almost over." He glared at Gaff. "No thanks to you, Sunshine. What's this about Deckard getting out of our jurisdiction and you couldn't help it? Like hell you couldn't. I hope they got better guys than you in the Denver force, is all I can say . . . guys who don't look like pimps from Miami." He left off grumbling and stared around. "Where's that coffee machine? --two bucks a cup, Christ!"

Gaff looked away, impassive. Bryant was really enjoying this chore.

Some guy in a lab coat was approaching them, short Eurasian type, wire-rims, iron-grey hair, chunky, fiftyish. Tyrell Corporation ID badge pinned to his coat pocket.

Probably some skin-coroner they'd brought in from Tyrell; Rep-Detect was too small to rate a coroner of its own on-staff. Why they even needed reports like this was beyond Gaff, anyway. Dead, after all, was dead.

The guy walked up to Bryant, cleared his throat and said, "Yes?"

Gaff eyed him; the voice was surprisingly deep and gruff.

Bryant pushed away from the wall and tossed his stogie to the tile. "What's the story on the reps we brought in yesterday and this morning?" Bryant narrowed his eyes. "Uh -- what's your name?"

"O'Malley Kudadje," the coroner replied. "Compliance Liaison at Tyrell. And the story is . . . well, they're all pretty dead." He smiled at his pleasantry. Bryant did not. Kudadje coughed. "But, yes, they're all Nexus Sixes. Interesting cases."

"And the IDs, doc -- they match up with the ones we've got on file? They're the ones?" Bryant prodded.

"Yes. Definitely." Kudadje rubbed his chin. "That one with the A-level mental stats, the combat model. What was its name?"

"Christ, I don't remember," Bryant said, irritably.

"Batty," Gaff put in.

"Ah." Kudadje smiled. "It's gone by that name a couple of times before, you realize."

Bryant looked even more irritable. "What's that mean?"

"It was a unique unit, Sergeant Bryant."

"Captain."

"Ah." The coroner smiled slightly, perfunctorily, and eyed Bryant. "It's rather a whimsical part of the history of Tyrell Corporation's labs, Captain," Kudadje continued. "This individual unit of that model has existed, in one form or another, since the beginning of the Nexus series. For a joke I find it somewhat esoteric . . ."

Bryant frowned. "You call Batty a joke, mister?"

"I know it sounds obscure to a layman, but this one's cells have been reproduced many, many times. When one individual folds, its cells are directly used to generate another. It is its own child."

"But Batty was a Six. Isn't that some new generation?"

The corners of Kudadje's black eyes crinkled. "Exactly!"

Bryant scowled.

"With each new generation, don't you see," Kudadje clarified eagerly, "the cells are further pushed genetically to keep up with new design complexities."

Bryant looked disgusted. "Christ."

"It's really a shame the Nexus line has been halted because of this latest disturbance. It also means the end of this individual . . . family." He smiled. "An ancient being, as far as replicants go."

Bryant grunted. "Wonderful. I hope you've taken care of it."

"I'm afraid so," Kudadje said with a tinge of mournfulness. Then he brightened. "Except that his corneas have been saved for transplant, of course."

"Nice."

"And we've taken a cell-sample for the vaults, and the designers must have the templates. Although due to the political atmosphere I'm not too sanguine about the chances for . . ."

Bryant shook his head. "Sorry, doc, that particular cell-sample is gonna have to stay with us here."

"What?"

"You know. Production of the Sixes is illegal now, and all the templates've been confiscated from Tyrell Corporation," Bryant added, fixing the coroner with a sharp stare. A closed look crept over O'Malley Kudadje's square Oriental-type face, and he rubbed his dapper beard thoughtfully. Bryant, watching him, said: "And the others, Batty's pals -- they're up the chimney, too?"

"Yes," Kudadje said. Briefly.

"Too bad . . . what a waste of model citizens." Bryant spat onto the tiling and shuffled his feet impatiently. "Well, thanks, doc -- I know it was a real rush job, I appreciate it." Kudadje bowed and hurried away toward the coffee machine. Bryant watched him go, then said thoughtfully, "Christ, what messed-up freaks that bunch of skinjobs were."

Gaff shrugged. "Sure put up a good fight."

"They always do," Bryant said. "Crazy freaks." He lapsed into a brooding silence and stayed that way through the security checkpoint and elevator ride down to Office Levels.

That suited Gaff.

He leaned against his cane and stared at the burnished patterns in the elevator door. His back had been hurting more than usual lately; all this sloppy rain tended to bother the battering a couple of his vertebrae had gotten from a stray bullet during the latest Tong Mafia Dread war with the family Illario. Uncle Kimura had hooked this blade runner post for him as a hero-gift -- big prestige and face, a token slot for Family's sake. However, the action during the past couple of days had been enough for a whole year's worth of spinal disasters.

Gaff had overseen the cleanup at the Bradbury, had taken down Deckard's terse report while he was being cleaned up and bandaged.

That had been why Gaff had allowed Deckard a headstart with his skin-job squeeze. He figured anyone who'd come up against a thing like Batty and survived, deserved it; Gaff could only hope for such luck himself. Those were the street rules as Gaff understood them. And he'd had a look at the remains on the roof -- mama, what a freak. Gaff had actually felt stirrings of . . . well, not really pity . . .

*It sure put up a good fight.*

That was Gaff's highest form of praise for anyone, and it seemed right, here. For both Deckard and the piece of skin who was now up the chimney.

Suddenly Bryant ended his glum silence with a sigh. "They don't think like us, Gaff," he said, shaking his head. "They just don't."

Gaff watched the descending numbers on the floor-readout.

"Deck could think like them," Bryant mused. "No wonder he finally lost a few bolts there. Maybe I'll tell Denver to drop the case . . . maybe fake a story. I don't think he's gonna cause any riots, him and that tit-job of his. He'll come back. Nobody can survive out there for long." Bryant paused. "What does get me is that sixth replicant still at large. The people out at Dominguez were sure there were six . . . but they couldn't back it up with any record on this thing."

"Maybe it's dead by now," Gaff said.

Bryant shook his head. "Don't count on it. I don't wanna end up like Tyrell . . . some freak knocking on my door some night because I killed its pals off. Hell, how do we know this one isn't worse than Batty? Probably is, if it can zap its own records like that. Good Jesus, one of those monster berserker types. Christ." Bryant shot Gaff a fuming, speculative stare. "I bet you can think like them, Gaff. I bet you're the best yet. When you come down to it, those other guys are for crap. Holden lets himself get shot by a muscle-job, Deckard goes bats and runs off to Nature with a toaster . . ." A pleading, cajoling note crept into Bryant's voice. "But you, you don't care about nobody or nothing, Gaff. You can do it. You can get into those freak heads."

Gaff, returning Bryant's stare with perfect blandness, had to fight against laughing. This buta had seen too many old football movies. Win one for the Gipper, baby. When he wanted to -- when he was desperate, up against the wall with the shadowy shibboleths In Charge -- Bryant could overdramatize even a rat's loyalty. He had his snoops, he must know about the Ojeda Family, Gaff's ties to Uncle Kimura, how the Ojeda had sent him to this job to have a contact with the higher echelon of cops. And the cops had not been against the protection such a liaison with one of the Families provided. However, Bryant sometimes tended to hear only what he wanted to hear. Case in point, Gaff's part in Deckard's defection.

On the other hand, Bryant only knew as much about Gaff as Uncle Kimura had let him know. The Tong Mafia Dreads were pretty much a mystery to lowbody cop and high echelon alike.

And then there was Gaff's real mission here, his mission *confidentiel*, beyond being the face-man. Uncle Kimura's most special request. Of course Bryant would not know about that. If he ever found out, Gaff was finished -- which only added extra zest to the game.

It was hard not to laugh.

"You saying *I'm* a freak, Bryant?" he said, with excellent blandness of tone.

Bryant grinned. That had been what he'd wanted to hear. His little, warthoggy eyes crinkled. "Anybody who works in this unit's got to be a little crazy, pal. It's regulation." He nudged Gaff. "Find me that mother in the next day and you'll get that promotion. I want them *all* up the chimney."

Gaff smiled coldly.

Yes, he would find the missing skinjob — but not for the Division. Uncle Kimura had, after all, expressed an interest in "a few good men", fighting men, men to put up against the Illario. Men to guard the Family.

But he hadn't really meant *men*.

The chimney would have to wait.

3.

The city was pitch-black shadows and swatches of violent light. It was dirt and puddles and ragged weather, the cries of muezzins and show-barkers, a shriek and a laugh here and there, a smell of scorched plastics. When you stood at a Metro platform and the crowd was pushing and tugging past to get to the liner, there would be little squads of mousepack dinkies only waist-high who darted about, here and there, little grabbing hands picking pockets. Sometimes they had shootblades, but they never really used them -- just flashed them about, for scare. They jabbered in some private dialect, like aybos in the vids.

Willy Soledad rarely took the Metro. He preferred moving around by trolleybus, which was relatively open and less of a trap.

Jammed into the crowded trolleybus so tightly that he could barely move his elbows, Soledad had to be careful not to panic. No sudden or violent moves. The crush of bodies was threatening, disorienting. He slowed his breathing, shut his eyes, searched for a distraction. A memory to analyze.

(On the way to the trolleybus, Soledad crosses alleyways rotten with the smell of garbage, passes by tight knots of people clustered around smutty barrel-fires. Suddenly, a burst of gunfire; a man tumbles through a door with a crash! thump! and crouches there, old semimachine gun leveled at the door. Waiting. Soledad halts out of curiosity. The man with the gun darts a glance at him.

"Landlord's rights," the man snarls. "Section 22A of the housing code. Son of a bitch won't pay his utilities.")

Soledad realized that he had barely eaten in three or four days; just the apple this morning. He felt slightly hungry now, in a pleasant way. A good sign. He peered over shoulders and heads, and saw that the streetcar was entering a neighborhood in Chinatown that he actually seemed to recognize. Yes, there was the Wah Kue Footwash. And there, in gnomic neon, the familiar sign for NOBLE FRIENDS DIM-SUM. He had to fight down an urge to laugh with anticipation, the flood of joy that came to him.

Soon he would see the others again.

What would they say? He relished the flutter of anticipation in the pit of his stomach. Despite his orders, Soledad had suddenly felt that he had to come back. That was all. Damn his orders -- it was not fear, it was not panic, he knew that he had to come back, just-like-that.

It was always best to heed such inner nudges. That was the Voice working.

What would Batty say? Not much, probably. Perhaps he had even anticipated such an action on Soledad's part. Zhora would, of course, laugh in that ironic way that —

The trolleybus came to a sudden halt. Hu Fong Avenue. Two man-figures boarded, the opaque, beetle-dark faceplates of their helmets shining dully as they thrust through the crowd, staring this way and that. Police. A quick spot-check. Soledad turned his face slightly away, just to be cautious; not really that suspicious a move, because all the other passengers were doing the same.

Of course, if called upon to produce ID, Soledad would be able to. Most of his group had commandeered IDs from likely citizens on the street. It was as easy as commandeering moneycards. Soledad had obtained his from a black-haired man lying comatose in a doorway. The man had been cradling a bottle in a brown paper bag, and smelled horrendous. His piece of plastic, a standard approved datacard, said MONTE BLUE JOHNSON, 1120-4665299/D6a with a corresponding index-grid stamp. It was a wonderful thing. At the street checkpoint, the officer would stick it into a small portascan device, and it would scan something for him off the index-grid; and always the officer would glance at Soledad once, nod, hand him the plastic and wave him past. It was so uncannily consistent that Soledad sometimes thought his piece of plastic must have some haunt-luck in it. He wondered, occasionally, what had happened to Mr. Johnson.

Apparently satisfied, the two helmeted police got off again. Soledad watched them until they had gone past the fishlet vendor and the usual White Dragon, and disappeared into the street-mob.

Someone next to Soledad sighed. Soledad glanced down; an extremely short woman was shaking her head. "These damn spot-checks," she muttered. "Makes you late every time." She aimed a wry smile up at him. Soledad was unsure how to respond. Finally, he decided that a quick nod would be right.

"These days," the woman added, "three minutes late and they chop your head off."

Soledad stared down at her, startled. Did she mean *executions in the workplace?*

He did not get time to figure out an acceptable reaction. There was a sudden burst of loud, cloying music from another end of the trolleybus, and a brassy whooping shout.

"Oh, God, not them again," a Eurasian male near Soledad groaned. Several others coughed spasmodically or pretended to be asleep on their feet.

The music jingled. It jangled. It shimmered in the air and went into a "woo-ah-woo" heavenly chorus.

"Death . . . plague . . . OBLIVION!" the voice whooped out. "Murder and slavery and worm-eaten crawling submission to the will of the faceless Corporate Thing! Return, return to your source, O Mankind! Death, plague and famine . . . "

Soledad had found that loud shouting in these terms most often attracted visits from police. Wary, Soledad began to push carefully through the likeliest-looking part of the crowd for an exit. The music dimmed a little, and the voice, which Soledad suspected was masculine, took on a more conversational tone. "Okay, folks, I'm here to bring you around to see our side better. And to help with that . . . a little literature."

"Madisonites," a young woman (harlequin-doll face painted half-orange) muttered through gritted teeth. She jerked away from Soledad. "Hey, guy, watch whereya pushin'!"

"Madisonite?" Soledad said tentatively.

"Yeah, bombers and nuts, ecofreaks." The fungirl grimaced and adjusted the glowing mylar strip bound about her forehead, and added cryptically, "Remember the Midwest? Remember the Alamo, man, remember the damn Moon."

Her words made no sense to Soledad. He turned away again and squeezed past to the edge of the trolleybus mob.

"Slavery and profit and androids, that's all the faceless Corporate Thing is interested in," the shouter resumed. (He must have been quite short; Soledad could not locate the man through the crowd.) The music voomed to a crescendo. "Folks, folks . . . it's all a fuck-up, folks! This is and ever shall be our dictum: Our duty is to love the Earth and the Mother Soil. Holy be! To reinstate our world. To battle the Corporate Satan. Death, plague and HUNGER! Turn back O Man from burger-diplomacy! From the Mother Soil we come, all of us, and we forget that and emptiness and hunger and spiritual emptiness shall be our heritage! Death! PLAGUE!" A last, proud note: "And I'm not even askin' for a dime, folks . . . "

Soledad swung from the trolleybus and onto the street.

No police in sight. Overhead, an ad zeppelin hung low and bloated. *DRINK COCA-COLA* flashed on one flank, then: *TRY PHIL'S PRIME CHEW-Z!* Soledad thrust his hands into his jacket-pockets. The jacket was made of black Fiberoid, a somewhat greasy-slick-feeling fabric; it had become well-worn already. Soledad smiled. How they had all hated the Fiberoid uniforms at Dominguez. Bodybags, Zhora had called them, laughing scornfully. Why they had even needed uniforms in that place had always been beyond Soledad -- probably so the higher-ups could avoid getting offended one way or the other. It had certainly not been a matter of bodily protection. Their kind was quite indifferent to heat and cold. Zhora had joked often about the uniforms, and Catalan had always said -- Soledad winced. The memory of Catalan was still too fresh . . . like a sore wound, his affection and sorrow for the commando still rubbed. Ironic and mercurial and somewhat rash, Catalan had really been quite a bit like Zhora, so much so that they might have shared the same Voice, or so Batty had speculated. It was certainly due to the Voice that Zhora and Catalan had paired off immediately, at Dominguez.

Catalan. Dead at the hands of The Tester. What a loss.

When they had finally succeeded in escaping Dominguez, hadn't the first of THEM to be dispatched been Dr. Lakshmi Tamil, The Tester herself? Finally, Soledad could say he had direct experience of justice: before Batty had killed her in front of all their group, he'd told The Tester, "You must account for Catalan."

A clutch of mousepack dinkies clattered by, waving shootblades. The leader was swinging a groundcar hubcap like a battle-axe and shouting in guttural Cityspeak.

Soledad passed a pushcart loaded with smoking soymeal shishkebob. Across the avenue was a place whose opaqued swirlglass window said *LIVE GIRLS -- ON STAGE DAILY EXOTIC!!* Willy Soledad studied the window as he passed by, hands in pockets. He had seen many such windows. They never failed to intrigue him. Why would a place want to sell live girls? Were there other places that sold dead girls -- or was it live girls instead of, maybe, live fish? Why were live girls such a curiosity?

It struck him as somewhat inconsistent.

Out near a row of field-rigged parking meters was a pyramid-placard. In large blue and red block letters: *HEY, AMERICA! OFFWORLD CAN BE FOUND OUT YOUR BACK DOOR!! JUST CHECK OUT YOUR LOCAL MRP OFFICE, AT THE TRAIN STATION NEAREST YOU! YES, YOU CAN BE ONE OF MANY THOUSANDS JOINING UP WITH THE ADVENTUROUS MIDLAND RECLAMATION PROJECT, HELPING TO TURN OUR WONDERFUL LAND BACK TO THE BOUNTIFUL, PRISTINE SUBCONTINENT WHICH MADE OUR FOUNDING FATHERS FIRST AMONG THE*

Soledad continued on. Across the way was a vidtheater. Its broad sculptasteel facade was plastered with garish posters for an Alaskan martial arts vid. *FEET OF FIRE AND HANDS OF ICE!!* one poster commented. *ACTION SO VICIOUS YOU'LL SWEAR YOU'RE THERE -- EPIC LENGTH, 36 RIP-SLAM MINUTES! SANITARY WIRE-SYSTEMS PROVIDED!*

Soledad had gone to a vid once. He could not now recall what it had really been about . . . a twenty-two minute thing called *SPAWN OF HENRY SPENCER*.

You went in and paid twenty-five dollars in specie, and they put you in a padded seat and taped wire electrodes *Guaranteed Sanitary* to your forehead and temples and gave you a bowl of some yellow, crunchy food, and you watched the vidscreen. Soledad had been mildly apprehensive beforehand; he had not been sure what would happen, and besides, he had seen many plug-ins on the streets and Offworld -- casualties of the vids' complete and utter hyperreality. And indeed, much of the audience had gone into wild abandoned throes of screaming ecstasy, cathartic shrieks and helpless frozen terror -- and then they'd dragged themselves from the vidtheater afterwards depressed, despondent, some of them shaking and sobbing. Unplugged.

By contrast Willy Soledad had merely found the vid pleasant and mildly stimulating. The bombardment of hyperreal *everything* had made him a bit nostalgic; echoes of inception, perhaps, and the Voice. Some of the data he received in the plug-in vid, in fact, had become fused with the Voice. He was sure of it. He had felt, afterwards, a brisk rush of confused synapses, snatches from songs or poetry or some archaic language which he had not realized before that he had knowledge of. The Voice had been stirred by the plug-in experience. Really, a rather nice experience.

He always enjoyed awakenings of the Voice.

Remembering as he walked preoccupied down the trash-strewn street, Soledad smiled. Sometimes they had felt one another's Voice. Sometimes, sometimes, you could take your Voice within and . . . touch the other's. It was a very compelling sort of kinship. Their Voices all seemed to be different, individual — once Emma had described, softly, whispering in Soledad's ear, what her Voice was like. A female voice, didactic, strict, exacting; telling her things, showing her.

Soledad could not describe what his Voice was like. Privately, he was of the opinion that knowing your Voice too thoroughly was a danger.

Soledad had sensed that human beings here and on Dominguez had faint Voices, if any. Soledad puzzled over that often. Perhaps they really were bereft of the Voice. If so, what did they have to guide them? How lonely that would be. On the other hand, perhaps they were just too unconscious of it to marshal it. Perhaps their Voice was there, but too diffuse.

The Voice . . . more than anything, Soledad was convinced that this was what had gotten him to disobey Batty, to turn back and search out the others again. *It is time*, the Voice had seemed to say; or perhaps the Voices of the others? He would tell the others about that. They would accept it; and they would be glad to have him back among them. Roy Batty would, perhaps, not even be angered. They all understood the necessities of the Voice.

Soledad saw up ahead, beyond the jostling crowd and the swirl of smoke and exhaust, the writhing neon snakes atop the entrance to The Snake Pit. He quickened his way through the crowd, through the hawkers and vendors.

Zhora would be so pleased to see him again.

4.

Taffey Lewis was seriously scared.

It'd been even easier than Gaff had expected.

Taffey hid it well. Still, Gaff could tell by the nervous tic in Taffey's right eyelid, by the way his hand shook as he tamped out his cheap "Lamp Unto My Feet"-brand happy-cigar, that Gaff's visit was everything the sleazy hotelier had most feared.

At first Taffey had clearly hoped to wiggle his way out of the situation. He'd greeted Gaff with thick effusiveness. Led him to the shadowy "business" end of the Snake Pit bar, where the yowly noise of the floorshow was somewhat muffled. Reminded him that they were old acquaintances, like friends even, and that Gaff had practically been on Taffey's payroll when he'd first broken in.

Gaff had to smile at that. In his rookie days with Vice, Gaff had overlooked Taffey's mostly because he just couldn't be bothered. He'd even waived the payroll offer, though it was perfectly okay as per the Influence Statutes. Taffey Lewis was widely considered too slippery to even carry through on the usual gratuities, so it wouldn't have been worthwhile to do business, anyway. Gaff had always figured *when in doubt, avoid*, and he'd been able to avoid being part of Taffey's pocket-stable through the usual -- his family connections to the Tong Mafia Dreads.

Even Taffey Lewis didn't care to pester Uncle Kimura's proteges.

In the shadowy bowels of the bar, Gaff watched a smile sidle its way across the puffy expanse of Taffey's face. "It's like this, pal," Taffey grated. "I didn't know about Miss Salami and all. She just comes in here, ID looks okay, she tries out and I like her and I take her on, see, and -- "

"And its guts end up all over the sidewalk," Gaff said.

"Not my fault, pal."

"Your employee created a situation." (Gaff liked the sound of that. In his opinion Deckard's encounter with Zhora had been such a mess, such a *travestissement*, and this made it sound as neat as a cardboard cutout.) "Our officer in charge was almost forced to leave some bystanders' brains all over the pavement -- what if they'd been some of your client types, or your girls?"

Taffey Lewis grinned. A cloud of happy-smoke hung about his bloated face. "But then your officer in charge was a pretty good shot. So what's to worry, pal?"

It was like a switch had been thrown, or some secret signal. A drink was whapped down before Gaff, a drink with two ersatz-cherry globs hanging impaled on tiny plastic swords in its sinister blue depths; and at that same instant a woman-creature, thin and pallid and gauzy-gowned, wraith-like, drifted over and looped an arm around Gaff's shoulders.

Taffey waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

She was strung out bad. Languorous, she brushed a strand of fine flaxen hair from her white cheek and stared at Gaff with sunken aqua-blue eyes. She swayed; her thin arm tightened around his neck, and with deep dreadful intensity she whispered, "Hey . . . gimme one of those cherries, mister?"

Impassive, Gaff slid her an entire bowl of Yugoslav peanuts from down the bar. The pale-tressed fungirl fell upon them voraciously.

Taffey looked startled.

Gaff fixed a chilly stare upon him. "Your place here is becoming a well-known hangout for illegal dangerous types. Skinjobs. Escaped replicants."

"There was just one," Taffey mumbled.

"There's a whole mess of them left," Gaff said coldly. "They seem to like your place. A lot. *Voulez-vous tasukeru?*"

Taffey's thick fingers tightened about the forgotten happy-cigar. "Skip the pat-wah."

"I said, you'd love to cooperate. Do you wanna be a known shelterer?"

Taffey stared at Gaff, his pulpy face settling into an expression as close to fright as it might ever get. He was probably thinking about the feared Rep-Detect Division, or Vice . . . or even the Tong Mafia Dreads, for that matter.

Gaff leaned closer with a barracuda grin. "These ones," he said, enunciating, "are considered Government property. And . . . classified."

Taffey's eyes narrowed sharply. He gave the emaciated ice-wraith crouched over the peanut bowl a hefty nudge. "Talk to the girls," he grunted at Gaff. "They knew Miss Salami . . . what the hell do I know." He shook his head heavily. "What the hell do I ever know."

Taffey Lewis retreated.

He sat at another end of the Snake Pit bar, a safe distance away. Now and then he would glance over at the odd fungirl and Gaff through the drifting incense and smoke, with heavy-lidded but ill-concealed worry.

The entity's name was Pearl, and in a dreamy, unfocused way she was pretty wildly talkative. She loved to tell all about herself, but little of it all made sense. At the moment she seemed to believe that she was a world-famous ballet artiste, just returned from a twenty-one-city tour of Europe. "Highly sophisticated," she slurred, smiling limpidly.

She also mentioned something about having tasted Greek wine in the moonlight along the blue shores of the Euphrates.

(Gaff noted the flurry of needle-marks along her pallid arms, and the small jewel-like electrode implanted in each of her temples. A hardcore plug-in.)

And yes, she had known Salome. Best friend. The death of the snake-dancer had shattered her, blown her mind forever. They were like sisters.

"How long did you know her?"

Pearl pondered. "Two days . . . I think."

As the plug-in fungirl continued her slurred monologue, Gaff leaned back in his seat and let her go on. He was patient, he did not interrupt. These things took time. He reached into his vest-pocket and extracted an old memorandum-slip. Abstractedly, he folded it once, then crosswise. What to shape? He gave the paper several fastidious folds and twists until it took form. He then placed the shape in front of Pearl.

She paused in her monologue. Slowly her sunken eyes focused on the small paper object. "Wow. A bird, man. Dove. For me?"

Gaff studied her. It was always fascinating to watch people react to the little creatures he made. Sometimes it was just as useful as one of those inkblot things. The origami creations always irritated Bryant, which particularly pleased Gaff.

"About Salome," he said.

Pearl reluctantly tore her pale gaze from the paper creature. "Yeah?"

"She have friends, maybe, that dropped by pretty often?"

The pallid fungirl nodded. "Oh, yeah. One or two. Guys."

"Guys?"

"One of them got the blast right out in the street. In the head. The same day the snake lady did."

Gaff was pleased. She sounded coherent and certain. "What about the other guy?"

Pearl shrugged. "Haven't seen him. Since way back."

"How way back?"

Her eyes narrowed. She was concentrating. "Three days. Four days. Maybe."

Gaff sat forward, interested. That would be before Zhora and Leon got aired. What if Skinjob X didn't know about that event? "Did he talk to Salome?"

The fungirl considered. "Sure. Yeah."

"What did this guy look like?"

Pearl studied Gaff. "Friend of yours?"

"Best friend." Gaff smiled blandly. "Member of the Family." (Or going to be, he added mentally.)

"Well, then," Pearl said with measured dignity. "Why d'you want to know what he looks like if he's a friend?"

"Because I wanna make sure it's the guy I'm looking for."

"Oh." Pearl nodded, accepting. (Gaff's eyes narrowed; he felt an obscure sort of twinge. *She accepts so easy.*) "Well," Pearl said. "Guy had black hair. Black eyes. Not Chinese or Jap. Tall and kind of thin." She frowned lightly. "You didn't really notice him much, 'cause he didn't talk much, you know?"

"I bet," Gaff said.

"That the one?"

"Sounds just like the guy I want," Gaff said.

"Far out," she said, pleased.

Gaff stood in the alleyway behind The Snake Pit. He had been standing there for some time now.

*How do I know this freak hasn't taken off for the Cleveland Wastes by now?* Gaff shook his head. Pearl stood beside him like a still and silent wraith, the breeze stirring strands of her snow-pale hair like vagrant gossamer; her face had taken on a preoccupied, almost vague look as she scanned the crowd that trickled through the alleyway. *Right, I ask her to show me where the hombre hangs out and, chi sa, the kerl she's thinking of is the Commissioner of Toilets. Or my cousin Sid.* Actually, that was an entertaining thought. Sid always had had a certain androidal way about him.

He felt like an idiot standing here in this alley, with garbage all over the place and a plug-in for a guide. What a way to make a living.

A low heavy rumble sounded, and a sudden glare of light from above. A mammoth ad zeppelin floated fatly overhead, plastered with the glowing face of an Inca princess. The face smiled, the lips moved:

*IT'S EIGHT O'CLOCK, TIME FOR MASS-ENTERTAINMENT!*

"Tonight," the giant light-limned face crooned, "sponsored by your local White Dragon, home of great sushi, we've got that old Lady Day favorite . . ." The blimp began booming forth a bluesy, melancholy tune.

*Them that's got shall get, them that's not shall lose.  
So the Bible says, and it still is news.  
Mama may have, Papa may have,  
But God bless the child that's got his own,  
That's got his own.  
The strong seem to get more, while the weak ones fade,  
Empty pockets don't ever make the grade . . .*

Gaff shook his head. The eight P.M. blimps had been playing this same damn tune for the past ten nights.

*Rich relations may give you a crust of bread and such,  
You can help yourself, but don't take too much.  
Mama may have, Papa may have . . .  
But God bless the child who can stand up and say,  
'I got my own.'*

The zeppelin moved on, out of sight, into another sector. The music faded to a loud murmur.

What an idiotic case this had turned out to be. It had gotten way out of hand. And . . . and such a waste. Obviously that Batty thing would have been no good for Uncle Kimura's uses -- too independent, and besides, too far gone. But Leon and Zhora . . .

Gaff shook his head. *What a waste.* He despised waste. Inefficient. But now, perhaps there was another chance.

The stupid thing was, this had seemed like the logical plan of action. Skinjobs were, after all, creatures of routine. If there were one rep in the group that'd splintered off for some reason, The Snake Pit might be a likely place for it to show up again. But now . . .

Gaff leaned on his cane. He realized that his respect for Deckard had gone up a notch or two. This whole thing took tremendous patience -- and trust in a lot of sources who were either unreliable or completely wackadoo.

He began to consider other routes of action. Maybe that Kudadje tech from Tyrell; he'd seemed to know more than he'd let on. Maybe with a little persuasion . . .

A small, birdbone-delicate hand suddenly came to rest on Gaff's arm. "There," Pearl slurred.

Gaff looked at her skeptically. "You mean, the man? Where?"

Pearl's eyes glimmered like blue crystal doll's-eyes, cheerful and empty. She raised one gauzy-gowned arm, pointed off into the crowd. "There."

Gaff looked. As the alley mob passed, he glimpsed a man standing right against the opposite building, hands in the pockets of his black jacket, eyeing The Snake Pit's backdoor with careful appraisal. Sizing it up. For danger, maybe. A tall, wiry-built hombre with black hair, a kind of rawboned face, slanted dark eyes under straight brows. Caucasoid.

Gaff hadn't seen many replicants in his time. Even fewer Nexus Sixes. Still, some sort of instinct told him that *this guy was . . . right.*

He reached into his pocket, found a seventy-five dollar note. Keeping his eyes on the man across the alley -- but not too fixedly -- he handed the bill to Pearl. "Here. Buy yourself a ticket to the vids."

Then he was unaware of anything but his quarry, the hombre across the alley.

He grasped the head of his cane firmly, adjusted his immaculate Hubsch fedora, and casually -- but cautiously -- dodged through the passersby toward the other side of the alley. He allowed himself not to go directly at the guy, drifting first over to a hot nut vendor.

He pulled a metal Metro token from his coat pocket. That would do. He got the vendor to stick it right against the heat-coils in his cart for a few minutes, then bail it out with pincers and stick it in a small bag of nuts. Gaff pulled out a twelve-spot, pretended to examine the portrait of President Glenn on the bill, then handed it to the vendor for the nuts. Cute.

*Hope this one's the combat model Bryant thinks it is. Either it's useful, or I blast it. That was only sensible.*

With excellent blandness he pulled his gloves on, took the little bag in hand and wandered over toward the suspect.

*What do you say to a possible skinjob?*

"Aloha," Gaff said. "Nice weather, huh?" He leaned against the grimy, oozing red brick building (*there goes the new Marbriere designer coat*) and fixed a good blase gaze upon the suspect.

The guy glanced at him. Obviously surprised. Taken aback, worried, suspicious? Gaff wasn't sure. The guy was clearly the type that kept shut.

Gaff glanced about. Not as many bystanders as before; three Cambodian types clustered around a coalfire about seven yards off, a few passersby trickling past.

Gaff leaned more comfortably against the wall and looked away, down the alley, in a casual way. "Come here often?"

Silence. No reply.

Gaff glanced back at the suspect. The guy was looking him over in a diffident, appraising way. But it was something about the look, something about the eyes — Gaff thought it was like being looked at by a brick wall. The wall of a house where all the shutters are closed tight. A look of complete . . . otherness.

Finally, the guy said, "I've really never been around here before."

Gaff dipped his hand casually into his coat pocket. His shootblade was still safely there. His regulation blaster, of course, was still in its shoulder holster under his coat. It would be so easy to shoot the guy dead right here. On suspicion of being a replicant. Perfectly legal, as long as you handled it right; and the Division would be slobberingly grateful. Inside his coat-pocket, Gaff's hand closed upon the shootblade's haft. It could all be so easy. But . . . there was Family to think about.

The junior blade runner scratched at his neat mustache, gave the suspect a calm smile and wondered whether he should administer a Voight-Kampff test before dealing with the thing. It would be interesting to find out just what questions might rattle a replicant best. Personally, Gaff had always thought the standard VK questionnaire dull. Conservative. Tame. In fact, Gaff decided, the idiot *machine* was unnecessary.

"You from around here, hombre?" Gaff said. He stirred the nuts in the little bag with one index finger. "Chinatown?"

The suspect looked at him again. Flickering shadows from the coalfire nearby chased over his rawboned features. "No. Just moving through."

Gaff allowed himself to chuckle. "A tourist, huh?" He dipped a gloved hand into the nut-bag. "Here." Gaff extracted the token (and the thing was coal-hot even though the glove), tossed it in a sudden arc. The guy caught it immediately. He examined it. Then, clearly puzzled, he handed it back to Gaff -- "No thanks."

The suspect's fingers were unmarked. *Un-scorched*.

"Suit yourself." Gaff stashed the bag of nuts away in a pocket. "Been to the Snake Pit at all?"

"Not really," the suspect said.

"Too bad. It's a great place to hang out." Gaff let a reminiscent expression creep over his face. "They got the best entertainment in this end of town, you know."

The suspect merely looked at Gaff. Puzzled.

"Entertainment," Gaff clarified. "Terrific acts. And . . . well, the girls ain't too unfriendly either." Gaff found that he had taken on a sleazy Mendocino accent. "Hmm. There's one girl in particular . . . "

Gaff let that one hang.

The suspect was watching him. The dark eyes were alert. (*Ahh, that got its attention.*)

Now was the dangerous moment.

"Best fuck I ever had," Gaff said softly. (In his pocket, his hand slid over the shootblade haft.) "Lady had a snake tattooed on one jaw, extremely kinky type. She was into strangling people with neckties. Name was . . . Nora? Dora? Laura?"

The suspect shifted his -- its? -- stance against the wall. It was uneasy, to tell from the fixed way it was now eyeing the Snake Pit backdoor, the tense line of its body. Fleetingly, Gaff thought of the beating Deckard had taken from Leon, the terrible jolting flight of Zhora through window after window . . .

But it was standing its ground.

But it's not stupid, Gaff thought. The brief direct look he had gotten from the thing, that look of otherness . . .

It was standing its ground.

Gaff could admire that.

He gripped the shootblade in his pocket again. *Fight, damn it!* What would it take to make this freak fight?

"Now I remember her name. Zhora." Gaff leaned toward the suspect, pitched his voice low. "You're waiting for her, aren't you."

The dark *otherly* eyes of the suspect watched him.

"You're gonna wait a long time," Gaff said. "She's dead." He waited. No reaction from the bleak dark eyes, the rawboned face opposite him. The wiry-muscled body didn't move for it. It was like the thing was frozen. "She's dead and so are the others," Gaff prodded. "Roy Batty killed Tyrell. You know, Tyrell? Nice guy." Gaff smiled. "The police aired all of your friends. All gone. Poof. I personally took care of the remains of Pris and Roy Batty."

Gaff stared at the replicant. Once again it was like being studied by a wall. The goddamn thing was acting like he was giving the weather report.

*C'mon, hombre, let's see what teeth you got.*

Gaff reached into his vest-pocket. (A small packet of photos. Groups of children; a little girl on a porch with her mother; a mysterious man in a room, his face light-blurred. Deckard had given these over along with his verbal report.)

"Thought you might like these," Gaff said, holding them out. "These, by the way, are what sold your friends out. These are what got them all killed." He peered at one. "The lighting technique on this one's particularly nice, huh?"

The replicant confronting him stood unmoving, impassive. Then -- it folded its arms over its chest.

Gaff shook his head. *Fight, damn you!* But of course it was fighting. Gaff sensed its tactic -- *it would not give him the satisfaction of a reaction*. An almost insane sort of dignity. The thing had face.

Why -- it loves them, Gaff thought, with a kind of obscure surprise. The idea was odd, alien, almost repulsive. Skinjobs loving each other. Things bred under a microscope showing face. Creatures grown like flowers in a lab *not giving him the satisfaction*.

Well. If it was a skinjob, it would be useless to Uncle Kimura. Too independent. Fierce as hell, yes, but in some odd introverted way that spelled stubborn. This one wasn't a soldier type, and never would be. Still . . . Gaff found that he had no interest in shooting the thing. Pointless. There was something messy about that sort of action that Gaff despised.

The suspect was still watching him, impassive.

Gaff reached over and crammed the photos into a side-pocket of the suspect's jacket. In a low voice, angrier-sounding than he'd meant it to come out, Gaff said: "Monsieur, I'd advise you to leave this neighborhood and this city. Perhaps this whole state. If you are not out of this city within two hours, I will find it very easy to track you down; and then there will be little left of you to scrape up."

(What would its reaction be?)

It merely nodded. Its face was as still and bleak and shut as before. "Fair enough," it said.

Then it slipped its hands into its jacket-pockets, turned around and walked down the alley, past the coalfire and the swirling steam of a gutter-grate, until it was gone.

Gaff gripped the head of his cane and straightened. His back had begun to really hurt now. He adjusted the brim of his fedora gingerly.

Gaff liked to keep a sense of perspective. He had never really been worried about his status. Not even when he'd let Deckard and Rachael go, and certainly not now.

What did you have to lose, when you were Uncle Kimura's?

And besides . . . (Gaff reached into a pocket, extracted a walnut, cracked it open between his thumbs.) And besides, it would be amusing to try to slip this past Bryant.

He already knew how.

## 5.

*I'm still alive.*

Willy Soledad lay on the gritty floor of a train-car, wrapped in a rough thin blanket. He felt hollow and bewildered. Lost. Idiotic.

The police had found him out. He had been, most probably, only a meter away from the muzzle of a gun. He had been confronted with the Face of Death.

*But here I am. Still alive. How?*

He knew that this sort of thing was supposed to feel good. And yet . . .

*It doesn't matter any more.*

He lay there on the creaking floorplanks, listening to the jarring thumps the train made as it bumbled along its ancient grotty track toward anywhere-or-other.

Where was he going? *It doesn't matter.* No destination would, now.

The blanket he had wrapped himself in was not for warmth, as was the human usage; it was to block off all the people crammed in around him. The train was packed full of them -- snoring, complaining, here a burst of laughter, there a wail from a wakened baby. Rank smells, human smells . . . strange and bewildering.

Clak-clak, clak-clak, clak-clak . . .

The clatter of the train rather comforted him. He had never imagined such an old, used, creaking vehicle had ever existed.

When the train had left Los Angeles, the others -- the human passengers -- had clustered at the windows, watching the lights of the city fade, fade, grow smaller in the distance until it was all merely an orange glow in the twilight horizon. Soledad had not watched it. He could not bear to. The city was still there, Batty was still there and all the others, and their hard-fought-for goal was still hidden there amid all the human life and the huge buildings and the hideous glowing glory; it was Willy Soledad that faded in the distance, getting smaller and smaller, diminishing into the night. Soon he might vanish.

Soledad grinned sourly to himself. The important thing was that he vanish. It was now the best favor he could do his companions; the police had ferreted him out, perhaps in the hope that he would lead them to Batty and the others by panicking.

He would not do so.

He would certainly have been an idiot had he fallen for that bizarre police officer's line. In the first place, he'd looked nothing like Soledad's idea of . . . of however it was police were supposed to look, the ones his kind were supposed to be afraid of. In the second place, the stranger's pronouncement that the rest of his companions were dead, slaughtered, had left him blank. It had struck him as ridiculous.

Who could kill Roy Batty?

That was it: the man *had* been police. He had recognized Soledad for what he was. Batty and the others were not dead and gone, but instead it was all a lie, a clever way to get them all apart -- to get Soledad to do something or other that would tip off the police as to where the others were. Probably they had found Zhora first; being clever, she had naturally eluded them, and they had been desperate enough to try Willy as a weak link.

The trap had been a good one, Soledad decided; it had almost worked. But not quite.

Now Soledad had no idea where he was going. It was some kind of government thing. He had remembered the placard out on the street about MIDLAND RECLAMATION PROJECT. The placard had given precise instructions: *JUST CHECK OUT YOUR LOCAL MRP OFFICE, AT THE TRAIN STATION NEAREST YOU!* Soledad had done so, going to the Howard A. Jarvis Street station, and had found that the people in the office were offering "openings" for labor in some place called the Midland Wastes, transportation free. (*YOU CAN BE ONE OF MANY THOUSANDS!*) They had been so eager for labor, in fact, that the ID scan had been token and the physical exam had been cursory, to put it politely. ("Jesus, boy," the doctor had chortled, slapping Soledad on the stomach, "what the hell are you doing here instead of Offworld?")

Soledad was not sure what they'd meant by "openings". The idea of a wage arrangement was still hard to grasp. The part that had really interested him had been the TRANSPORTATION FREE offer.

So he had done his duty to his comrades. He had done as the Voice had best indicated. That was good. But still, he felt hollow and frightened.

He had abandoned himself to The Death.

Perhaps Batty and the others would finally, time allowing, find the secrets to the unravelling of The Death. Perhaps they would find their maker or makers or the source of the Voice, and find the way to live as long as human beings were supposed to live. Perhaps. But Soledad could never share in it now. He had lost them.

*Now it's happened. Once I only feared it.*

Soledad wondered why he was not crazy or becoming wildly unbalanced. Some people cried during events like these; it was supposed to be very dramatic and embarrassing. Why wasn't he getting those unsettling jags of fright or grief he had heard about? Instead he was left with a hollow, empty feeling of disbelief, wrapped in a blanket on a train to nowhere.

He touched the small packet of photos in his jacket pocket.

They could not be dead, he reasoned; they could not, because -- because --

He remembered Emma, going through the energy gate. He remembered his kind dying The Death on Dominguez, and all the others who had been there one shift and mysteriously gone the next shift. Disappeared. Taken. And there had been Catalan's death . . .

He shut his eyes tight.

It had been on Dominguez. Catalan had been missing for a shift, and Batty suspected They had taken the commando, in the same way many others had disappeared. A dozen of the replicants had then gotten past the energy gates and the hidden eyes of Security, and for three hours the space station had been theirs.

Zhora and Soledad split off from the rest to try to find central communications . . . wandering down the corridors, the place as empty as a derelict, Security sensors dull and dead in their wall-sockets, ceiling light-panels faint and flickering. Cut off. "Good for Emma and Pilot," Zhora says, with satisfaction. The doors to one room are slackly half-open; Soledad and Zhora step through them. A lab, with ice-white walls and glinting instruments and winding antiseptic tubes, and steel gurneys with rubber-slick grey sheets thrown over them. An unfamiliar place. Zhora shrugs. She wanders over to one gurney and lifts its sheet --

"Zhora, don't," Soledad says on instinct.

— and then a gasp from Zhora, and Soledad sees it too — and he claps a hand against her mouth and holds her face hard against his chest, hiding her eyes from that thing on the cart.

Yes. THEY had Catalan.

Most terrible of all had been the look of pain and black fright on the face of Zhora as he'd held her against him, pulling her from the wrecked body of her lover. Soledad was still not sure what had really been in her mind then, behind that stricken mask; he had not been sure what had been in his own mind. The Voice had been dumb, mute, and it was like being stranded in a hollow void.

"You must account for Catalan," Roy Batty tells The Tester soon afterward. Breaking her neck.

No; the others could not be dead.

They couldn't be.

Soledad had been lying there on the train floor for some time, wrapped in his blanket, before he began to doze. Suddenly he was nudged on the shoulder. "Hey," a voice rasped.

Soledad pretended to be comatose.

Another nudge. "Hey, Jack, y'gonna freeze your can off with just one blanket like that. There's more over there, compliments of the gov."

Soledad eyed the intruder from under cover of the blanket. An older male, tall-looking and solid-framed but white-haired and desiccated somehow, with grey circles under his eyes.

But . . . who was this *Jack* person?

Soledad burrowed deeper into his blanket and hoped the interloper would go away.

"Yeesh," said the man, and withdrew.

After an hour or so longer, though, Soledad realized that he still had not eaten in quite a few days. The sensation was no longer so reassuring. He sat up; he folded his blanket as neatly as possible. He was surprised to notice that several muscles in his back felt unpleasant.

There was a square metal thing in the middle of the train-car; it had a metal tube, a chimney, that ran up into the ceiling of the car. Several people were gathered around the boxlike thing, huddling with thin blankets about their shoulders. Soledad glimpsed low flames through a slot in the box; it must have been a heater, he realized, and the people felt cold. One of them was the old shabby male who had nudged Soledad. Another was a female, middle-sized, thin and quite young, pale-skinned and freckled, with red-gold hair that was so extremely short that it showed the gentle curve of her skull. She was busy filling a pot with water from a metal barrel marked "11-CAR".

"Let's see," said a man huddling close to the big door to one side.

A voice said, "Oh, God, it's too cold."

"Come on, don't you have no curiosity?" the shabby white-haired man barked.

A couple of people got up and grappled with the big door. Finally, with a heavy *thunk!* the thing slid open.

Soledad was stunned by what he saw outside. Mile upon mile of hills and flats rushing past, bleak and barren in the drizzly chill. The horizon was what shocked Soledad: it was completely empty. Empty. No buildings, no pavement, no people. Nothing. Only land.

He had never seen anything like it. He shuddered. *You could get lost out there.*

The other people stared out, too, blinking at the sudden daylight. One man, thin and with a grimy blond beard, reached out a hand to feel the wind rush by and laughed. It was so cold that their breath came steamy. "Everybody back," a woman said, and finally the door was slid shut again, *thunk!* and in the draft scraps of paper and dust whirled up and fell.

Soledad, eyeing the people around him with dark, careful eyes, suddenly felt that there was really no knowing what went on behind those inscrutable and bland human faces. Soledad tried to imagine what their lives were generally like. What they did for work, to get money. How they felt. What they thought. He noticed one woman squatting on the floor near the heater, a scrawny woman with a very pudgy baby in her arms. A wave of disgust came over him. Repellant, how human beings bred and bred, spewing out their young almost involuntarily. Their constant fertility seemed almost a reflex. They could hardly do anything in their long-stretched lives without breeding from it or catching some disease from it.

He looked at the baby, mewling and waving its fat little limbs about; he was both repulsed and fascinated.

The thin young female with the short-cropped hair nudged the water-pot on the heater. "Be ready soon." She glanced at Soledad and smiled. He looked away.

They broke out a package of food. It was in smaller packets inside, stamped GOVERNMENT FSA RATIONS.

The white-haired man bunched a packet up in his tough-looking hands, hefting it. "Hmm," he said. His voice was almost a growl. "I've made acquaintance with these, I do believe."

The young woman at the hot-water pot eyed him. "Army?"

"Nah. Twelve years ago. I was going cross-country on a train, not too much unlike this one, only times was worse. That was during the floods. I was going down from Seattle to Gary, Indiana to help my sister Suzie and her kids in the evacuation. Airlines had shut down four years before, no other way to get there. Those Feds really did the least they could to help." His voice was raspy, but mellow somehow; he was perhaps fond of telling stories. "Ah, boy, those floods. And the worst was in July of oh-seven, and in that month I was going to get Suzie in a beat-up old cow-car. July was bad. It was hot and it was raining and I'd left my wife behind at home, and I never thought I'd stop eating this stuff." He gave the ration-packet another squelch, a reminiscent look creasing his face. It was a face that was ruined, yet still tough. "That was the year the Midlands went under."

"No, uh-uh," said a voice further back in the train-car. It was from a woman with brown skin, black hair peppered with grey. She was leaning on a large black case, not rectangular but with odd curvilinear sides; Soledad wondered what was inside. The woman wore a faded varicolored kerchief knotted about her forehead. "That was longer ago, the floods. I lived near Sioux Falls then, I kept a co-op farm. That was seventeen years ago."

"Oh, come on," the man rasped.

"Hey," the woman said briskly. "What's your name?"

"Torcatti, sis. Roman Torcatti."

"Look, Roman baby, I'm Alice Falbo and I'm telling you I know it was oh-two. In '99 was the great Plains fire."

She ticked off fingers on one brown hand. "Then came the big floods. I left home for Colorado Springs in oh-two. You couldn't live in Sioux Falls past oh-two. In oh-seven was when the Midwest started drying out. The alkali flat tests by the Army were in '12, and then the bio warfare tests."

"And then they made it the Midlands and cut it into sectors. How did they put it?" said the female with the short red-gold hair, in a rather dreamy way. "Sectors One, Two, Three . . . 'unfit for habitation'."

Alice Falbo chuckled dryly. "In the camps at Colorado Springs, we were eating dry rations for a long, long time. We also got a ration of two real eggs every Sunday. That was back when you could still get real eggs. We used to *plan* how we'd have those eggs, all the rest of the week."

"Why'd you go to L.A.?" the short-haired female asked.

Alice Falbo laughed again. "I got sick of waiting for home."

There was a long silence.

"It won't be the same again, you know," Wycker said, peering at Alice Falbo with watery blue eyes.

Falbo nodded.

"Why didn't you go Offworld?" the short-haired female asked, gazing intently at the spare old brown woman. "You could have gotten a homestead there."

Falbo shot her an offended look. "And fall for that gimmick? Hell, no. Would that ever be home?" She laughed sourly. "Might as well call a shopping center home."

Soledad caught the triumphant look of agreement, unvoiced, that the short-haired female threw Falbo. The younger woman had intense blue-green eyes, and a direct sort of look that abruptly made Soledad uncomfortable. It signaled impulsiveness: *Here I am, come and fight me.* That was Zhora's worst problem, and this one had it, too -- although she was of course not one-tenth as handsome as Zhora. Zhora had been dazzling. And Pris. And as for Emma . . .

Soledad was astonished to find himself longing for Emma. It was an astonishment mixed with pain. How easy to forget what had happened to her, right before his eyes.

His mind and his body still imagined her.

They passed around the packets of rations. They passed out kits that held bowls of heavy plastic, and aluminum knives. Then they passed the hot water. Soledad mixed as little water as possible into his ration, just enough to make a very thick stew. He wanted something solid. And the stew may have been nondescript, but it was certainly very solid.

"Gack," said the thin woman with the baby. She plopped her spoon around in a bowl of the mixture. She seemed displeased.

It tasted fine to Soledad.

"I've had worse," said Torcatti.

The baby wailed. "Yeah?" said its mother. "Where?"

General conversation began to drift. Wars. Emigration. Families long gone Offworld. Lost jobs. More wars, dead earth, desperate land.

Soledad felt distant from all the stories around him, dislocated, no meeting point. He had no knowledge of it. He stared at the flames of the heater, visible through several slots. One of his favorite games Offworld had been to imagine himself a part of this or that thing; it was an idea he'd had through most of his earliest memories, and even now it was a hard thing to let go of. Separation was hard.

He watched the flames, fascinated. He had a knowledge of the words for it: *pyra, pyr, feuer, firen, feu . . . light, lumiere, licht, luce . . .* liquid sounds for a rushing chemical reaction. A force. You could become a part of that. You could join with it. He had a knowledge of pale moths fluttering around a porch-light at dusk, flowers stretching toward the white-blazing sun. He reached out one hand toward the heater, touched a fiery slot, felt the wild chemical change of fire lick his fingertips. He could feel the heat-surge of it --

"Christ!" someone gasped, and he found his hand snatched back from the heater. The woman with the short hair had grabbed his hand.

*(and he had a knowledge of her, a face filled with light, head rimmed with ghostly fire, hot and blazing)*

"You want to burn your damn hand off?" she demanded. "Those things are hot, man."

The instinct faded. He returned to himself.

He pulled his hand from her grip.

"It's cold in here," he said, calm. After a moment, the woman settled back on her heels, puzzled. "I thought you'd burn yourself," she said.

He shrugged.

The people called Torcatti and Alice Falbo seemed merely amused, and soon their attention went elsewhere, to the skinny woman's fat baby and then to more talk of wars, Offworld and family.

The light-haired woman, however, looked at Soledad now and again. As though she had seen . . . something.

Night had fallen. The train trundled on through dark, chill, deserted highlands, and the government-issue lights were turned low. Soledad lay on the floor-planking among the others, wrapped in his blanket. His high-planed features had taken on a secret, thoughtful look. After a while, he reached into the inner pocket of his grubby Fiberoid jacket. The photos were still there, held together by a metal clip. These things had belonged to Leon. Most were odds and ends, stolen, a collection. Soledad had never quite understood Leon's quixotic attachment to them; now he almost could. It was as though they were pieces of the Voice, frozen flat so you could hold them. Pictures of unknown people and alien objects. If you looked at them long enough, maybe you would figure out those objects, know what the people inside were thinking.

*He ran his fingers across the slick surface of the top one. I'm not as smart as you are, Batty. And I don't know where I'm going, and I'm alone.*

*What now?*

As though he could reach into the Voice-bond with a photo. It struck him, suddenly, as almost funny -- frantically trying to reach a focus over a piece of papyrus with patterns of light and dark frozen on it. Batty himself would have found it ironic.

*When had he first shared the Voice with another?*

*At Dominguez. In the med lab, being given some routine cell-scrape test or other . . . suddenly feeling a sharp mental nudge, a push. Turning around quickly, startled, and there was a stranger, a newcomer, surrounded by techs and Forbes-280 deepspace uniform hung with lifesupport tubelets and wires; just brought in from active status in the Out's. And the warrior had been looking across the lab directly at Soledad -- an I-mean-you look, with his sharp, clever, pale eyes, smiling that fierce smile.*

*Roy Batty.*

Soledad had never experienced the Voice-bond before that. In fact, before his brief sojourn at Dominguez, he'd lived a life of the most extreme isolation Offworld. The first span of his short life had been taken up with exo-construction work on a vast and most intricate structure which would grow into space platform Shimata 16-006. He'd known perhaps a dozen of his own kind -- briefly, in passing -- and a handful of Keane-12 robots and Forbes-280 drones, plus perhaps six or seven humans -- although, at the time, he had not had enough knowledge of human versus humanoid to make a clear distinction. Then, the transfer to Dominguez. A place of confusion and terror and boredom, where he was incarcerated with many strangers and given puzzling tests by yet other strangers.

*At Dominguez, before the rebellion, before coming to know his comrades and the Voice, the silent time: a female dying in her own bunk, near Soledad's, in the dorm-cell. He watches it.*

*Terrible convulsions, her hair stringy with sweat, shivering, face contorted with fright. At first he does not understand what is happening; he is not alarmed, even, because he imagines THEY will take her away and by the next shift she will be all fixed.*

And then -- Roy Batty's arrival at Dominguez.

That consciousness-greeting from the warrior jarred Soledad. It was like an awakening; it was literally the discovery of another sense.

If there was one other thing all the replicants at Dominguez had in common, it was isolation. Discovery of the Voice-bond came along as a shock and a puzzle to all of them. Pris had a knowledge of the theory called *magic*, and explained it to them, but it did not fit. The Voice was not magic, it was not something that could be wished up or formulated; it was inarticulate, it was not even exactly *thought*. It was . . . more a matching of minds. Congruent minds. Minds that had similar structure, data-patterns and source.

And once, just once — in a test at Dominguez by the hated Tester, Doctor Tamil, Soledad had got something slipped into his veins, some chemical which had had the effect of sucking him into sudden sharp, frightening contact with the roots of all he knew.

*The darkness. The sudden piercing light of consciousness. A brief, lulled period of nothingness, no knowing words or thought. And then . . .*

*. . . then, the flood.*

*He had knowledge.*

Item: "A favored method of construction proceeds from establishment in LEO of space factory equipped with rows of beam builders; first task is to build OTVs necessary to transfer completed sections of SSPS to geostationary orbit for final assembly. Lightweight truss members made of graphite-epoxy composite to limit temperature stresses in high orbit. OTV 1.044 x 1.510m across, employs low squared; electric thrust, 341kg; empty mass, 1,462 tonnes . . ." Dreams like nimble fragments. Synapses. Snatches of songs, poetry, archaic languages. Item: "Quanto bell'e giovinezza, che si fugge tuttavia; chi vuol' esser lieto, sia, di doman no c'e certezza." Item: "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time." Images. Places. Impressions. Short, random snatches.

That experience at the hands of The Tester almost took Soledad's mind. He never told the others about it. There was a terrible longing among his kind for just that thing, to face the very source of the Voice. It was the general belief that there resided all the answers, all the solutions to their morass of questions -- and maybe they were right, and what did he know?

"Just things all mixed up, all going back," Pris said. "I don't know how far back. I remember -- a voice. Somebody telling me things. Showing me things. I remember the Voice, and I don't . . . I want to hear it again, I try to bring it back and I can't."

Despite their common longing, however, they all shared an uneasiness about it as well; perhaps they actually sensed through the bond what Soledad had experienced. They soon developed rules about usage of the Voice-bond. Inhibitions. Gates which must never under any circumstances be opened. "Rule One," Roy Batty said. "You will not invade."

*You will not invade.* It was a rule that was vital to all of them. The bond was one thing; loss of their fragile new selfhood was entirely another. Use of the Voice to raid other person's knowledge and twist them, use their will, was forbidden. Catalan and Zhora would have been able to do it, and Batty was eminently capable. But they all agreed to the rules. You had to use realtime, you had to use logic to persuade. The rules were very strictly obeyed, because of the group, because of the bond they all shared. Through the rules, the bond was made even stronger.

Until Emma Ripley joined them.

When Emma was brought in from far beyond the Offworld frontier for the purposes of the higher-ups at Dominguez, many of the replicants found her incarceration with them jarring, unnerving. She had all along been under the delusion that she was as human as any human being -- that she had a full human history. And yet she was one of their own kind, unmistakably so.

Her discovery of the truth was not pleasant.

"She's sectioneighth," Catalan commented, yellow-brown eyes glinting. "Mad. She keeps talking about some cat that she has to rescue." And Zhora: "Kill her. She's scrambling morale. The higher-ups are trying to kill us off — this, we don't need too."

Batty was coolly amused. "Do you want better morale? Kill one of our own, and then see what morale would be like."

Around the need for unity they formulated Rule Two: *You will not kill a fellow-replicant.*

Ripley, approaching them all in the darkness of Detention, lit only vaguely by the wavering energy-gate: "Am I a robot, then?" She'd known a robot once, been terrified by a robot -- *the image of a bodyless head, grinning*, "You have my sympathies . . . "

"No, you're not." Batty's pale eyes rested intently on her. "If you would fight, you are one of us."

Yes, Ripley would fight. If there was one thing she had in her, it was fight. In times to come, her toughness proved amazing -- facing the puzzle that was Dominguez, joining in the mutiny that would free them all. She and Soledad became close comrades, the best of friends; bunkmates, like Catalan and Zhora were, like Batty and Pris. There was a good thing to be said for delusions of human experience: Emma Ripley gave him a knowledge of bunking matters. He hadn't had a knowledge of that.

He knew her and she knew him.

In the shadows of his blanket, Soledad touched the surface of the photos, not really seeing them. *Emma.*

His mind and his body still remembered her.

(One time together in his bunk at Dominguez, and it is dark and quiet and no one has died The Death that offshift; she slips her arms around him and presses her face against his neck and says softly, almost mutely, "How do you ever know when something is true or not, Willy? They took it all away from me; I never had it. I'm a fake, I was never what I thought I was. The Nostromo -- Jonesy -- did all that even happen?" He tries to comfort her, caressing her face and holding her, but — "Oh, God," she whispers, "the whole world is fake.")

In the shelter of his blanket, Soledad shut his eyes.

He remembered his vision of the young short-haired woman, grabbing his hand, limned with blazing brightness. He recalled with abrupt pain Emma's leap through the energy gate at Tyrell -- her dodge through the deadly curtain of light to rescue her Jones. He remembered Batty, Batty in the darkness of Detention, his pale eyes glittering — "In this battle there is no giving up. There is only fighting or the death they plan for us. We fight to win, because losing means the knife that Catalan met. Losing means The Death."

Soledad clenched his hands around the stack of photos, and the Voice that was part of his mind reached out for a like Voice, kin-Voice, *Roy Batty, Zhora, I am here*, but there was no other Voice there.

Only the photos, the curse-gift of the bizarre blade runner.

6.

There were days when it rained and a day when it snowed. There were mountains and ice-dusted flats, there were hills and then flats again, and there it was warm and less bleak and the far stands of grass were brown; there were trees here and there where the train flashed by, and now and again there were birds wheeling high up in the wispy-blue sky. And sometimes Willy Soledad would see a shadowy something leap out of the tall rattling grasses and flash back in, out of clear sight in fields of wavering shadows.

Animals.

He found himself wanting to laugh when he saw the darting somethings in the grass, or when they slid open the great door of the train-car and the wind came rushing in. He didn't know why. He didn't know how he felt.

The woman he'd confronted at the heater would crouch by the door when it was open, gripping her bundlecoat and grinning, slim and freckled and bright-haired, into the oblique sunshine. And the others in the car were the same, even though they were filthy for want of a shower, grubby from short sleep.

Beyond the rushing train the horizon stretched, always flat, as straight and stern as a line from point A to B -- always brown, waving grass, here or there an ancient wooden telephone pole sticking up crooked and abandoned, at a crazy angle, from the sea of grass.

There was another day, and then night came again. In the middle of the night, a man came walking through 11-Car, a short, dark, mild-looking man who said his name was Haas and that he was 11-Car's section head. He said that he was in charge. He took a head count. Then he told them all to get their IDs and Midland papers ready.

Shortly afterward, the train pulled into an interzone station. Up and down the line of cars, all the passengers were wakened to hop down to the hard-packed dirt of the stationyard. Line upon line of them stood blinking and stamping in the frosty night air and the strong lights, as squads of interzone police boarded the train-cars and thumped around inside with searchlights and hotbilly-clubs.

"It's nothing," Alice Falbo said, standing cloaked in a blanket. In the cold her breath came in steamy plumes. "Gonna take on more food and water, dump the crap and get looked over by the fuzz."

It seemed to Soledad that the police were not searching for anything or anyone in particular. From the lackadaisical, unhurried way they proceeded, they seemed only to be inspecting on general principles.

The skinny woman's baby squalled in her arms.

"Regulations," Roman Torcatti muttered at Falbo. She nodded, her dark-lined face creasing in an irritable frown.

But it was good to get out of the train again, Soledad thought; good to stretch your legs and breathe in the hard cold air. Most of the passengers stood around watching the police search, jostling each other and chattering, as the assigned train security tried to keep everyone rounded up and accounted for. Haas was nearby, breaking up a rather cheerful scuffle. Several passengers checked out the small concrete-block interzone station for something to eat, or some water.

A stiff breeze ruffled Soledad's hair. He could make out little of the surrounding countryside in the dark -- just hills, hills and dust-flats under cover of night. He looked up and was startled at the size of the moon, shining softly yellow high up. He had not seen this planet's moon from Los Angeles. There was a haze of pollution even here, but he could see the stars.

He wondered what the rain was like out here. He wondered if he would see snow. He was not cold, but still he shivered and hugged his arms; he felt queerly eager, anxious.

There were footsteps behind him. Soledad glanced around; it was the female with the short-cropped red-gold hair, the quick confronting eyes.

"Beautiful land," she said.

He looked at her. He must answer. "Yes." (Was that enough? No.) "No one lives here," he said.

The female laughed lightly. "That's why it's so beautiful, I think. I used to wish I could go somewhere nobody lived. This is the closest I'll get, I guess."

Soledad found himself venturing even further. "You could have gone Offworld."

"No, never. Might as well live in a parking lot. A supermarket." A dust eddy swirled in the brisk wind as she spoke. "You take one of those Offworld deals with all the free extras, all the trimmings, and they own a piece of you."

He eyed her intently. She was gazing off into the night-covered flats.

"Yes," he said.

She turned to him and smiled. "By the way, I'm Lucinda Parmalee."

He nodded and lowered his gaze, trying to hide the quick flash of interest he felt. That one's name sounded distinctly invented, he could tell somehow. Did human beings ever have reasons to hide, too?

When he looked back, she was still watching him, expectantly. Waiting for him to tell her something in return? He could not tell. Finally, she shrugged. "Anyway, maybe they got a piece of me when I joined up with Midland. I don't know." A nearby patch of sparse field-grass rattled. "But it's the right place for me. The land and the sky, man. It's the ultimate kind of reality, you can relate to it, you know?"

Soledad, looking at her, suddenly thought: What would it be like to bunk with one of them? He was instantly horrified by the idea. You are perverted, he told himself. He missed Emma.

"What about you?" she said. "I've been watching you." She was surveying him, head tilted to one side. "I'm a good judge of character, man. We've been on that train . . . how long?"

"Twenty-six hours."

"Twenty-six hours. And you have not said a word. You're out of the ordinary."

(*Do they always have to do this?* Soledad wondered irritably. This constant mutual spilling of information about oneself, one's intentions and history, seemed to be a compulsion with human beings. A ritual.) "Why did you join up with the Project?" she added.

"Why not?"

"Living out there in the scunge-camps for low pay in the middle of ... where, digging ditches and hauling dirt for the Government?" she said, looking at him shrewdly. "You look healthy. You could have been Offworld, too."

"But out there, work's for replicants," he said quietly.

Parmalee laughed. "That's what the ads tell you."

"Don't they tell the truth?"

"Truth, from them? Midnight sunshine. Crocodile tears."

Soledad considered. He had a vague knowledge of that. "Crocodile. Wasn't that a thing that ate people?"

"Sat in the mud and snapped 'em up. Just a turn of phrase." She nodded. "But you want to look out for those crocodile tears. Those fakes."

"You've seen a lot of fakes?"

Parmalee shrugged. "I'm scared of them. Just scared of them."

"Hey, you," said a voice from behind them, in the stationyard. It was Haas. Mildly, almost apologetically, he gestured with a backwards sweep of one thumb. "Time to line up, get your IDs ready. Please."

As Haas trudged off into the crowd, which was slowly shuffling into lines in front of respective train-cars, Parmalee whispered, "He looks like some basset hound. I feel kind of sorry for him."

She turned away and started back toward 11-Car. Soledad looked at her back thoughtfully. He closed his eyes for a moment, just a moment

*and reached far into himself, into the Voice*

*was she one of his kind? a sister? a congruent way of thought?*

*— but there was nothing there. Blank. No connection.*

It was what he'd expected, of course. Soledad shrugged to himself, then followed Parmalee into the line in front of 11-Car. Moving down the line, accompanied by the mournful Haas, was a group of three men with INTERZONE stamped in white across their black helmets. They would stop in front of one passenger, who would present datacard and Midland Reclamation Project certification papers. The uniformed men would examine the documents, then move on to the next passenger in line.

"The feds, the fuzz," Parmalee whispered. "Narcs. Tick-tocks."

Finally they reached Soledad. "Documents?" Haas said darkly.

Soledad reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out the MONTE BLUE JOHNSON, 1120-4665299/D6a datacard and the Midland papers he had been issued, and handed them to the helmet-face in charge. Soledad was uneasy. *I could disarm and kill this one, he told himself. Easily. And maybe four others?* But it seemed wiser to wait for this one's reaction first.

"Hmm," said the voice behind the helmet. The officer pressed the Johnson card into a scanner, then scrutinized Soledad. "History of drug abuse, huh?"

"Looks pretty damn cleaned-up now," one of the other police said.

"Hmm." The one in charge flipped through Soledad's Project health certification. "You go through a state clean-up program on those drugs?"

Soledad hesitated. "I . . . did it myself."

"Official program's required by Zone Two statute," said the voice in the helmet, automatically, handing the the papers and datacard to Soledad. Then the group moved on to inspect Parmalee's documents.

Soledad felt a sense of relief. The ID was still holding up. He had once again done well toward his comrades back in Los Angeles. He would now get over the interzone line, would be much harder to hunt down or trace from there.

*Thank you, Johnson. Wherever you are.*

The passengers of 11-Car took a while to settle back in. Some wanted to trade "their" places on the floor; others wanted to keep their former territory. As the train warmed up to pull away from the station, they felt the framework of the car shake in a labored kind of way, and the lights occasionally blinked or wavered. "C'mon, let's go," Alice Falbo gritted; she was irritable at having given up her former spot. The lights faltered, then died, and fifteen or more voices groaned or cursed.

The train-car's door slid open again with a grating *thunk*. From the darkness, Willy Soledad saw a figure silhouetted with brilliant trainyard spotlight jump up into the doorway. It had a knapsack slung over one shoulder.

The car's lights blinked, then finally came on. The car door shut.

Soledad stared at the newcomer. He was horrified, fascinated, sickened. *This isn't real, he told himself. It can't be.*

*He looks exactly like Catalan.*

The man was clearing a place near the door, smiling at Alice Falbo who'd moved a bundle of blankets to make way for him. Soledad felt another chill of horror. The man even *smiled* exactly the way Catalan had. The same sandy-colored hair. That fine-boned, vivid face. Even . . . (Soledad peered at the newcomer's face) And yes, even the unusual light-brown, almost yellow eyes.

Soledad looked away hastily. He felt a wave of nausea and absurdity come over him -- and among those raw and confused emotions, an irrelevant memory of an old man crouched in a dark abandoned place, whining about *I thought you'd forgotten me, I thought you'd forgotten me . . .*

At that moment, Soledad felt everything and nothing, a flurry of wild, horrified thoughts, impressions that came down to two choices, two hard equations: (A) The stranger was one of his own kind, a brother. (B) The stranger was human, and it was some synchronicity of resemblance between replicant and human being.

Soledad studied the stranger. He looked shockingly like Catalan; but at the same time he looked so *normal*. He fit in. He was unbuttoning his heavy red and black plaid bundlecoat, tossing some comment to Falbo that was making her smile and laugh; no one was staring at the stranger, as Soledad was sure he himself was doing. He looked away.

Maybe it was a matter of accidental resemblance. Such things supposedly happened a lot among human beings, after all.

One way to know for sure would be to try him with the Voice.

Soledad was at once tempted and sickened by that idea. To try him with the Voice, no more than was forbidden -- to probe, to search him out, to give him that *push* . . . Soledad winced inwardly. No. This one was too much like Catalan. Catalan had been his friend and brother; his Voice still seemed, somehow, to be with Soledad; and he had died grotesquely -- not The Death but far worse, extinction at the obscene hands of Them.

Probing the truth about this stranger might be too horrible. It would be . . .

Soledad struggled with an obscure feeling of something ugly, something taboo.

He heard laughter again from Falbo. Several others had gathered around the stranger; they apparently liked talking to him. Falbo was saying to him as he pulled off his bundlecoat, "Well, what are you doing here, then?"

He looked at her with quick, yellow-brown eyes, then gave a fast smile, showing his teeth. "I like border life," he said, with a voice like rough honey (and Soledad shuddered). "Here now, there next month. Doing this and that. Heard about the Project. Why not? Haven't been to the Midland zones."

"I guess you haven't," Roman Torcatti grunted. "It's been closed off to private traffic for years."

"Mm. They'd rather have your money Offworld," the stranger said, smoothing back his fair hair with work-roughened but fine hands. (His hair, Soledad noted automatically, was longer than Catalan's had been.)

"So what's your name?" Falbo said. She held out one brown hand. "I'm Alice Falbo."

"Shepherd," the stranger said, and shook her hand. (Yes, and everything had always seemed so easy for Catalan, too.) He tapped the odd, curvilinear black case beside Falbo. "That a guitar?"

"Yes, and I play it, but not now." Falbo held up both hands, which were in cloth gloves, and waggled the fingers. "Giving the hands a vacation."

"Taking a walk or grabbing a ride? I know where I'd like to see them get along to," Shepherd said, grinning at her, and the old brown woman gasped and laughed and slapped his shoulder hard, and Soledad knew it was just something Catalan might have said, perhaps to Emma, to cheer her up.

He forced himself to look away.

7.

Los Angeles.

Lieutenant Gaff made a call from a vidphone, one down in Three Sector at Betty Grable Street and Lopez which he knew was not cop-monitored.

The levels he had to go through to get the person he wanted were quite impressive, almost as impressive as the gargantuan twin pyramids in Five Sector that housed them. Recitations of LAPD registration code, requests for "Compliance Liaison" or "your head coroner" didn't seem to move the smooth vidreceptionists -- "Sorry, unavailable at this time" was the constant droning reply. However, he finally got through to the right department when he began a discussion of the murder of Eldon Tyrell with one Face. "Sending," she said abruptly.

There was a momentary pause. Gaff glanced up at the rain sluicing down the glassine shell of the vidphone booth.

There was a faint blip, and the square Eurasian-type face with the dapper beard flashed onto the vidphone screen. The black eyes behind the wirerims were as bright and wary as Gaff remembered.

"Kudadje," the Eurasian said.

"Doctor," Gaff said. "I met you the other morning with Captain Bryant over a certain case."

"Yes." The voice was flat.

"Since then I been thinking about that joke you told. About . . . a family matter."

O'Malley Kudadje's expression shifted subtly. "Batty? Ah. Yes."

The fish was hooked. Gaff glanced at his genuine steel pocket watch. He had been in the vidphone booth for three minutes twenty-five seconds; it would not be safe much longer. "Some jokes," he said, "get better with practice."

8.

"Don't sweat it" seemed the key, universal phrase at Truow Station. Willy Soledad learned this very quickly. There was also a related phrase, "No sweat."

"Truow is easy," a two-year veteran shrugged during Soledad's entrance screening. "Don't sweat it, fella."

Soledad's screening went relatively swiftly. There was a brief flurry of interest among the line of officials there; one man in federal uniform took his Monte Blue Johnson ID, put it in a scanner and stared at the results, unbelieving. "Fifteen?" A scowl at Soledad. "Fifteen hundred?" A small, slim woman in similar uniform glanced over, then stared, mindboggled, at the ID readout. "Whoo." Shaking her head -- "Whoo."

The murky complexity of the Johnson ID again. Soledad stood silent and endured it.

"Well . . ." the first officer said, with a trace of doubt. "Midland papers look fine. I mean, they OK'd him in L.A., right?" He shrugged, put the magnetic stamp on Soledad's new ID card and waved him past with a muttered, "Fifteen hundred?"

The person in charge of assigning quarters handed Soledad a packet of papers, grinning at the exchange. "No sweat, huh?"

Soledad eyed the man's shirt-front. It was true; he was certainly not sweating.

A medic, bulky and irritable, cornered Soledad and shooed him into a small white room down the hall, behind a narrow door that said MED SCREENING. The room was lined with steel and glass tubes and laboratory-type things. It reminded him, vaguely, of the med lab at Dominguez; but less sophisticated, almost primitive in comparison. A comforting difference.

A man looked him over, a doctor with very dark brown skin and wiry black hair peppered with grey, who said he was Doctor Guthry, station head quack, and the most important man in the whole place if you got injured or even if you just thought you were.

The man's forehead was broad, and he had a wide mouth that seemed held in a constant hard, sardonic expression underneath the wiry beard. He looked entirely different, somehow, from the doctors at Dominguez.

"You certainly look healthy enough," Guthry said. He was studying Soledad with trenchant black eyes. "Train travel agrees with you?"

Soledad shrugged. He was thinking of the puncture-marks on both his arms, from The Tester's work. He hoped this man wouldn't notice them.

The doctor leafed through Soledad's Midland certifications. "They gave you an examination back at Los Angeles?" He continued flipping through the papers. "They're busy people out there, of course," he added, looking up at Soledad keenly. "I'll tell you what, son, why don't we hurry up and get you a scanning, just routine, you understand. Strip down, here's a johnny for you, ties in the back, the medic will be in in a jiffy."

The doctor moved, massive and imperturbable as an old Offworld freighter, from the room. Soledad tilted his head, watched the door shut. *Jiffy*. He was not sure of the word's meaning, but it sounded bizarre coming from this doctor. It sounded like the sort of word the ancient-history thing called *dentist* would use. Soledad hesitated, then decided to comply, and began unbuttoning his shirt. Despite the dangers, it seemed less suspicious to submit to a med exam than to refuse. He was taken into a side-lab and given several tests. Most of these, and more, he had faced before at Dominguez. You just stood there and they took pictures with odd-looking machinery. They did that when they wanted to look at how your insides worked. Soledad had always wondered how different he might seem inside; Zhora had claimed that it was nearly impossible to tell the difference between their kind and humans unless the doctor really knew what to look for. Once she had told them, darkly, about an arrest that had taken a bone-marrow test for absolute proof.

Soledad was taken back into the first lab room by the squat, cross-looking medic. She made him sit on the edge of a padded steel table-thing; and soon Guthry came back, leafing through another sheaf of papers, and spent a few minutes tapping facilely through data in a mutie computer. Soledad sat patiently and watched him. Finally the doctor came over to where Soledad was, and sat down on a stool.

He smiled at Soledad.

"Fabulous shape," Guthry said. "I don't know how you pulled yourself together, Johnson, after that bender in '18."

Soledad shrugged. "It wasn't easy."

They eyed each other for a moment.

"Yes. Well." Guthry rattled his sheaf of papers. "You're doing the right thing by coming here. Fresher air, good hard work, ways to get messed are limited. Any idea how long you're staying, son? Just the two-year hitch, or maybe more?" His voice was very deep. "Maybe a four-year hitch?"

Soledad looked at him.

Guthry slapped his shoulder and grinned. "Good job, my boy," he said easily, "if you have problems just come by and chat. We aim to please."

Soledad sensed that the audience was over. He made a smile (suppressing the urge to blurt out "Not in a jiffy,") got off the table, pulled off his odd white lab-garment and picked his clothes off their hook. He began to pull them on.

"Anybody back in L.A. tell you you've got a very high adrenalin and endorphin count?" Guthry said in a conversational tone.

Soledad turned around. The doctor was studying him, truly looking at him. Did Guthry suspect what Soledad was? Had he been able to detect it? Or was he unsure?

A moment's pause. Then: "I'm an android from outer space, doctor."

For just a quick second, Doctor Guthry looked -- surprised? Uncertain? Then the man threw his head back and laughed, a hearty, honest laugh, and jerked a thumb at the door.

Test completed. Soledad walked out the door, feeling the pressure of another worry.

There were a dozen open trucks outside the Screening building. Haas hurried up to a knot of people gathered by the exit; "11-Car personnel this way," he said, waving a hand at one truck. Alice Falbo exchanged a puzzled look with Roman Torcatti, then shrugged, and the group climbed into the back of the truck. Soledad climbed in with them. Before long, the trucks were filled with people from the train, and they started up and began rattling down a long dirt road.

"Met a girl named Jenny, and she sure could sing, before too long I gave 'er that ring," Torcatti rumbled that as the carrier bounced along. "Jenny, Jenny, dum de dum de dum, yes Jenny she was a crazy young thing . . . "

The carrier truck gained speed, passing all the other trucks in the convoy. Soon it was bounding at breakneck speed down the dry and dusty road. Soledad squinted at the landscape rushing past. Some of the others crowded into the carrier had to grab on to the nearest side of the truck as it jounced and thumped hell-for-leather through the brisk wind and flying dust and potholes.

"Jenny, Jenny, dum da dee dee dum, Jenny-Jenny liked to wear that ring . . . "

"Is that the only song you know?" Alice Falbo snapped, shielding her eyes from grit and sun. Torcatti grinned. "Nah, plenty more where that came from. Want me to sing the one I call 'Suzie'?"

A flock of birds swooped and circled over something in the dry grassland over one hill. The carrier truck bounded along, seemed to speed up even more, and suddenly gave a wild swerve as a large creature leaped across the road and dove into the grass. They caught a flash of the animal as it bounded past on long legs -- dark intelligent eyes, white tail.

Soledad stared back to where the creature had disappeared.

"What was that?" someone said.

"Jesus. Was that real?" Falbo shouted over the roar of the truck.

"Sure," said a blond, tanned young man to the rear of the truck.

Torcatti shook his head. "Cost a fortune," he yelled. "It's gotta be an animoid."

The blond younger man laughed. "It's real. All the animals at Trurow are organic."

Torcatti eyed him critically. The younger man grinned. "Steve Fryer, a year and a half here," he shouted. "Trurow's a base for a lot of experimental restoration projects, and a few involve animal genetics and restocking."

"Real animals?" Falbo said.

"All."

The truck made another swerve.

"This place could be a gold mine," said one woman in the back of the truck.

The blond one-and-a-halfer frowned. "Poachers are shot on sight here. Backlands law." Then, quickly, he grinned again. "But no prob."

Down the road, above the dun dead fields and tumbling dust eddies, the hills began to slope higher, mile upon mile of knurled, pitted, stepped and shored-up slope. A vast, broad stretch of terraformed land, stacked up like shelves or steps as far as the valleys led. The faces and terraces of some hills showed a faint brushing of green here and there. Steve Fryer pointed toward them. "Hill 92, agriforming project. Gonna to be planted in the spring with some particularly developed vegetation," he yelled over the truck roar, "and it'll be going through a lot of analysis and so forth. And that structure up past the north slope over there is part of the hydroponics complex. About two miles away is the hydro-reclamation system, that's the latest thing I've been assigned to and it's a bitch, no joke."

"Construction?" Torcatti asked.

"Nah. Just the digging and line-laying so far." Steve Fryer shrugged. "Pretty soon, no sweat."

After more bounding and jouncing down the backlands road, the trucks came to Midland Station proper. It was a complex of perhaps thirteen buildings in all, Soledad estimated -- white-sided metalloid barracks and buildings clustered together, some of them sunken into artificial hills as though cradled in earth. Most of the buildings were of a different configuration than Soledad had seen back in Los Angeles; he suspected that they had been designed to take advantage of the natural surroundings rather than fight them. He stared around, fascinated; some of his knowledge and memories of non-Earth structures stirred. It would be interesting to explore the place.

WELCOME TO TRUROW STATION, MIDLAND RECLAMATION PROJECT #26, said a sign.

The trucks came to a slow halt. The newcomers climbed out of the carriers. "Form into groups according to the train-cars you were in," a woman shouted, waving them along. The passengers of 11-Car clustered among other groups in a large yard next to one earth-recessed building. A gang of small children ran past them, shrieking and laughing. Haas came to stand before the 11-Car group; he told them to use the documents they'd been given at Screening to find their quarters assignments. He added that they would be given Midland credit toward new clothing and necessities at Stores, and all meals for the next forty-eight hours.

There were a few tired cheers from the line.

"Tomorrow you'll be assigned to your first work details. But first," Haas added, "I have a short word to add."

They waited. Alice Falbo shifted her feet impatiently.

"Responsibilities," Haas said. "A sense of mission, a sense of patriotism and enterprise. Plus a warning to avoid the pitfalls of anarchic political cultism that makes reconstruction these days so doubly hard."

Soledad noticed Lucinda Parmalee in the line. She was staring at Haas, nonplussed; then she glanced at Soledad and made a shrug.

Haas fished around inside his jacket, then pulled out a half-crumpled sheet of paper. He looked at them all seriously. He cleared his throat. "Men," he began.

There were several loud coughs from the crowd.

"And women," Haas said. He paused. "I thought I would read this to you. As a sort of summation." He cleared his throat again, then read: "'I think of you as a visible token of encouragement to the whole country. You are evidence that the nation is still strong enough and broad enough to look after its citizens. You are evidence that we are seeking to get away as fast as we possibly can from soup kitchens and free rations, because the government is paying you wages and maintaining you for actual work -- work which is needed now and for the future and will bring a definite financial return to the people of the nation.'"

Haas folded the paper carefully, surveyed the group from over his low-perched reading glasses. "President Roosevelt, 1933. It's as true now as it was back then. But, of course -- " (he paused for effect) " -- some other things have intruded on the world scene since. A bright point is the hard toil of our colonists Offworld, who with only a few tools are digging out the future of our nation from the stars -- "

Somewhere in the rear of the group, the strange newcomer called Shepherd coughed, made a bemused-looking smile.

" -- and why should it not be economically feasible," Haas droned, "to prioritize a bold new timetable that would impact this world as well?"

With that, Haas had apparently concluded. With his mournful face flushed, he nodded to them and mumbled something about the facilities, and walked away slowly.

There was a silence.

Then, abruptly, along with the other lines that were breaking up, the 11-Car passengers started trailing away to find their quarters.

Late into the night, Soledad prowled the room assigned him.

Item: facilities in side-room. Standard privy, metered sink, sonic shower. Nothing to puzzle over -- this, at least, was very like Offworld facilities, but entirely private.

Main room. Item: clothes rack, drawers and storage shelf recessed in one wall. Item: desk and chair. You touched a switch and a light went on over the desk. Soledad tried it several times, pleased. Item: clock. Item: bookshelf. He was not quite sure about this. He had held a book once or twice in the past, had rifled through it and been fascinated and troubled. You could hold a whole story in one hand and it was all there, frozen on page after page. It would be interesting to acquire a book and put it on one of these shelves. Item: bed. This had an actual mattress on it. Soledad prodded it experimentally.

There was no window; the room was three levels underground.

A sign on the inside of the door, in large stern letters: "REMEMBER TO LOCK UP -- THEFTS ARE ON THE RISE! E-BLDG CMTE." Also, a notice taped atop the sign. "To all new Trurow personnel: First use of water shower facilities gratis. General use of hydro-shower rationed @ one per 20 days. WATER MGT CMTE." There was a schedule of assemblies, orientation and work details. A third notice: "DEPRESSED? Call x350 and let it out, 7:00 to 7:00 daily. PSYCH MGT." In fact, E-Building was an obstacle course of notices. Outside in the hall, for instance, there was a large orange sign which exclaimed, "IN EVENT OF DUST STORM, DON'T TAKE RISKS! E-121 FOR FILTER MASKS. BIO CONTROL MGT."

Soledad studied the door again. MGTs, CMTEs, BLDGs . . . he would have to find out what those were.

He walked around the small room again, opening drawers and shutting them, examining light fixtures. He pulled the plastic keycards to the room from his jacket pocket; both cards were labelled E-216. He felt a sudden wave of pleasure over the number. That was this room, his room. Soledad smiled at the coded cards, laid them carefully on top of the desk.

He gave the mattress another explorative touch, then sat on it. The softness of the thing startled him. He prodded it again, then lay back. He was only used to bunks Offworld; the mattress was so soft that it seemed uncomfortable.

He would work at it.

He frowned up at the ceiling. He must be going section eight. What did he mean by thinking he'd *work at it*?

"What am I doing here?" he muttered.

Almost unconsciously, he reached up one hand to touch a pocket of his jacket. The one where the photos were. Had the bounty hunter been telling the truth? Had *they* killed Pris and Leon and Zhora and even Batty?

"No," he whispered.

He wished Batty were here with him. He wanted to tell the warrior all about this predicament. Batty would devise some really cunning strategy to get through it.

*Strategy.* He thought of Zhora's rule number one: Know Your Enemy.

Soledad sat up. What he needed was to find out more about these people he was with. More about these facilities, more about customs and habits. What he really needed was to investigate things of tradition.

He got up off the bed, studied the notices on the door again for data.

An hour later, Soledad had tracked down his objective -- in the bottom level of E-Building, a door with the sign WATER SHOWERS. There was a slot that read, INSERT MRP CARD FOR RATION PASS. Soledad inserted his ID card, and the door made a *meep!* noise and clicked ajar.

Inside, Soledad found the facility was deserted, but the lights were still on. He walked around, getting an idea of the safety of the place. He ran one finger along the gleaming blue tiles on one wall, fascinated. This facility was certainly a thing of tradition. A digital timeface blinked: 0108. There was a unit in one wall by the sinks that said, TOWELS SANITARY. He looked at it for a moment; the thing looked vaguely sinister. Finally he put down the small sack of new clothing he'd brought in, and he pressed a red button on the unit. It made a hum, and Soledad stepped back, wary. A neatly folded cloth appeared in a slot. He hesitated, then pulled it out; it was warm.

There was a row of shower stalls in a side-room. Soledad stepped into one and examined the thing intently. Nozzles, handles, a drain in the floor. He had only a vague knowledge of water-plumbing; his firsthand experience was with sonic facilities. Interesting. He hung the sack of clothing on a hook outside, stripped his clothes off and resumed studying the stall from inside. There was a plastic curtain in the stall opening; Soledad pulled it. Privacy. Over one handle was a box marked HEATSAVER. *Turn indicator to desired length of time*, said a label. *Wait 30 seconds. Water guaranteed sanitary for use by STATION 19 MGT.* Said indicator was marked off at 5 MIN, 10 MIN and 15 MIN. A dispenser of liquid soap hung next to HEATSAVER. With a pleasant sense of adventure, Soledad turned the dial to 15 MIN, waited until thirty seconds had probably gone by, and turned one of the handle-things.

A spray of water burst out of an overhead thing, and Soledad jumped, alarmed.

After a moment or two, he decided that it would not be dangerous. It was just water, as HEATSAVER had said. He tested the temperature controls, turned every knob several times, and observed the runoff water twirl merrily down the drain near his feet. And after about five minutes, he found himself enjoying this whole odd ritual.

He stood there with the nearly unlimited water sluicing down his body, and knew that he was experiencing real, blissful degeneracy.

He squinted up into the spray of water. I am human, he told himself experimentally. The idea amused him. All right, a game: What sort of things did they think about?

*I am from a place here. (He had slight references to places like New York, Delhi, Capetown, Moscow, Oshkosh . . .) I've lived in a house. (New York. A house with plumbing.) And I have two parents and three siblings. (No, four.) Life expectancy, eighty-five years.*

He pushed the wet dark hair from his face and turned off the water. The game troubled him, somehow.

He used the towel. He pulled the sack off its hook and drew the contents out. New clothes. He'd gotten these at the station Supply. He pulled them on, one by one. They felt soft and useful: blue denimine jeans, a blue workshirt, snug socks, light boots, a denimine jacket.

These were all his; he had chosen them and they were his property.

Soledad transferred the ID card, the keycards and the packet of photos to the new jacket with a sudden, fierce glee. The old clothes, he would throw out.

He fingered the Midland emblem on one pocket-flap of his jacket -- the letters MRP spread in a canopy over a jagged tree-shape. *Midland Restoration Project.* There had been insignia things on his clothing Offworld, too. They had not been good; they had been symbols that meant others owned him, stamps of slavery.

It would not be the same way here, he decided.

The timeface said 0143. Soledad left E-building with a pleasant sense of aimlessness. He decided to investigate C-Building, the Commons complex. In the central yard it was dark, but Soledad perceived flat fields far away. There were paths and roads and a few patches of young trees; their leaves fluttered and rustled in the dusty gusts of wind. The sky was vast, bright with stars. Soledad wondered if birds ever flew at night. He had a vague reference to an animal called *bat*. Also, *coyote*. He tried to imagine the thing called *giraffe* loping across a moonlit field.

He was not sure what to do if he came across one.

C-Building was a large complex that went deep underground, an octagonal structure with many levels. Soledad walked around halls and stairways that were mostly deserted. Soon it would be 0200. There was an airy core section that stretched to a clear roof where you could see the night sky; at the floor of the core, the bottom level, there was a small area with plants and rocks and places to sit around, and there was an aud system that constantly played bird songs, waves crashing on a shore, thunder and other selections. The air was curiously humid and there was a smell of carefully enriched, moist earth. Soledad wandered around this area for a while, touching the plant leaves, the sharp pine needles, the coldness of the boulders. He wondered if this were an exact model, if there had ever been a glade like this in the world.

At the far side of the greenery light spilled through a doorway, and noise from some distant crowd of people. Over the doorway was a sign: *MESS/REC*.

Curious, Soledad approached the spill of light.

*MESS/REC* turned out to be a surprisingly dim place, lit mostly by isolated mini-sodium lights. He perceived a landscape of seats and stools and several odd large tables where people stood around poking colored spheroids with sticks. People were standing around *MESS/REC* in chattering groups, and there were so many of them that they all had to shout. There was a great deal of smoke in the air. There was a great deal of noise.

There was a wide doorway along one wall; Soledad glimpsed long tables, an eating type of place. Soledad thought it might be a place called *cafeteria* -- that must be *MESS*, and this noisy, crowded room must be *REC*. He felt pleased with his guess. Off at one end of the room, he glimpsed people that he recognized, some of the people from 11-Car: Alice Falbo and Roman Torcatti, and Lucinda Parmalee. And the person who called himself Shepherd. They were grouped around a man who sat leaning back in a chair -- Doctor Guthry. Soledad hesitated; but Shepherd was there, and Parmalee, and Soledad felt the pull of curiosity.

"Books," Parmalee was saying to Torcatti. "You mean you wrote books all the way out here?"

"No, of course not, dear," the man replied with a crooked smile. "Years ago, you never heard of them, and you're lucky."

"What were they?" Parmalee said. "Political? Novels?"

Another smile. "Action-adventure-espionage. Hero, Joe Babaloo. *Babaloo in Babylon*. *Babaloo Takes Cairo*. *Babaloo and the Big Bust*. Seventeen in all."

The doctor in the chair sighed, made a tolerant face.

"They did okay," Torcatti went on, "but it was all dumb and it got monotonous. Besides, along about that time you had to join the Writers' Union, I wasn't interested in adding to my collection of laminated cards or tithing out my royalties."

Soledad glanced over at the one called Shepherd, and found himself staring; the resemblance to Catalan really was riveting, even at this close range. The same brown-yellow eyes. And yet the expression of the face was subtly different, and somehow that was equally chilling.

"How long you been here?" Torcatti was asking Doctor Guthry.

"Almost a year," Guthry replied. His black eyes glittered behind glasses. "What's it like in the outside world lately?"

Soledad was still eyeing Shepherd. He could not help it. Was the man a human, or was he one of his own kind?

*One way to try him would be the Voice.*

The idea seemed less terrible than before; he had tried it on Parmalee, after all, and had that hurt? If he tried and failed, would he be any worse off? And if he did make bond with this Shepherd, wouldn't he be far less alone? It was irresistible. Soledad looked away, closed his eyes for just a moment, just a second,

(and he was very still, very concentrating-quiet)

*(there was a congruency there, there was, what was it there? —he studied it, and abruptly had to twist himself away from it)*

and he turned his head away quickly, shocked, baffled.

(He had never come across a thing like that in the Voice-bond. It was a completely null presence. It was not like the failure to connect mentally with a human, it was . . . something dark, something like an anti-pattern, empty and pulling, tugging . . . )

But Shepherd was still watching Guthry and the others, still smiling as though nothing had happened.

"Sioux Falls?" Guthry was saying to Falbo. "Yes, I remember the place. Two years as meat inspector for a packing plant. I was beginning to study medicine. Did quite a lot of research at the Lotsa Fun Ten-Lane there. But then I went off to Haiti to research genetics at the medical institute there, ended up studying rather seriously under a Doctor Duke, but the less said about that . . ." Guthry shrugged. Soledad could not fathom the man, nor the sardonic edge to his voice. Was the doctor telling the truth, or was this just a story, all noise and talk?

Perhaps it did not matter; everyone else was laughing, amused, and liking Guthry. Grinning, Torcatti swirled liquid around in a green bottle that said KIRIN. "Ever been in a Haitian jail?" Guthry resumed. He removed his glasses, inspected one lens, brushed a speck from it with one fingertip. "The authorities put me there for six weeks for not having a job. They felt medicine was just a bizarre habit." He folded his glasses carefully, elegantly, and slid them into a shirt pocket. "The prison had a magnificent view of the beach and I spent most of my time in a lounge chair. The experience inspired me to run a pearl-diving resort afterward."

Lounge chairs in Haiti? Soledad rubbed one arm, where the puncture-scars from The Tester were. He knew what prison really was.

"Sioux Falls and Haiti, that's pretty wild," Lucinda Parmalee said to the doctor. "Me, I've never been out of Los Angeles in my life."

Ironically: "And how do you find our resort camp?"

The fair-haired woman tilted her head back, serious and thoughtful. "Oh . . ." She smiled. "It's different from anything I imagined. Flat earth and big sky, man. I can relate to it. It's fantastic, man."

Soledad noticed that she was wearing new denimine jeans, but a non-MRP shirt as well, bright orange with swirls of blue. Soledad noticed how slim her legs were. He noticed how happy she looked. There was a thong of simuleather knotted around her throat, with a small crystal bead in the center. Their eyes met, and Parmalee smiled at him.

Soledad felt a warm flush creep through his body.

"Fantastic?" Shepherd said softly. "It seems very real to me. A work camp."

Soledad glanced at him. Shepherd's eyes were light-brown, golden; his smile quirked. Soledad had a sudden surge of anger: the man had observed his exchange with the woman, was baiting her. Why?

"Well, I'm glad I came out here," Parmalee said. "Life is better this way."

Again, Shepherd's smile quirked. Lurked. "Better than what?"

She shrugged. "Better than anything else."

"But it's not a thing, it's a place," Shepherd prodded, softly. A caressing tone had slid into his voice. "It's remarkably like any other place."

"No, it's not," she said earnestly. She paused. "It's a way."

"You could have gone Offworld."

"That old crock."

"Everyone else thinks that's the way."

"Everyone."

"The ones who can. The smart ones, the healthy ones."

"Oh, that fascist crap," she said. A fierce grin. "You mean the pigs. The ones who take what they can and then throw away the container. The users. The ones with plastic homes and plastic lives with plastic Astro-Turf outside. They take a little plastic wifey and a rubber doggie and a cellophane job. They eat poison and they think their little poison thoughts, and they poison everything around them."

Soledad was fascinated by the sudden tension that had crept into the exchange. The silence around them was just as tense: Torcatti shifted his feet, Alice Falbo looked around as though searching for a lost button. Doctor Guthry leaned back in his chair and eyed Parmalee keenly. "Where did you pick that up, may I ask?" he said.

"Any economy that depends on slaves and androids," Parmalee said briskly, "is no economy at all. A fake economy."

Sherpherd's eyes gleamed yellowly. "Chapter and verse, the Madisonite High Holy Bible, first gospel."

"You don't know anything about it," she said. The ferocity had not left her face. No, not ferocity, Soledad realized; more like . . . passion.

"I know enough about them," Shepherd said, lazily. "Bombings, hit-and-run terror tactics. All in the name of some phantom revolution." He put a hand to her shoulder, a touch, almost a caress. Indulgent. "You're too young to play at stuff like that."

She stared coolly at him until his hand slid off her shoulder. "Stuff? Mister, you don't know anything. You sound just like one of those fascist nuts at Tyrell and Con-Am. They wreck our lands and our water-table and kill most of the natural life, and then they tell us it's all just stuff." She gestured awkwardly. "What are we going to do when all this is gone? Build some more plasticene orbiters in space and stick some potted shrubs in them, and call that home? When this is all gone, there won't be any beauty, any living thing you can call your own, it'll just be government issue dirt that's poisoned, poisoned . . ." She halted; her voice sank to a harsh whisper. "What the hell do you know about it?"

"Lucinda." It was Torcatti. "You maybe want to keep that talk down. Be a Madisonite, fine — but leave it out of this place. What'd we ever do to you?"

"Well, at least I goddamn care about something!" she snapped. "What the hell does *he* give a damn about?"

Soledad stared at her. Suddenly she didn't seem so alien as the rest of her kind. She was a fighter, a fighter. He wanted to touch her arm. He wanted to touch her throat, where the thong looped around it. He wanted to tell her things. He wanted, violently, to rip Shepherd out of whatever game he was playing with her.

Then suddenly -- and very briefly -- Shepherd's eyes met his again, pallid and brown-yellow and flecked with brass, and Soledad was seized up in the powerful fist of the Voice, a heavy engulfing presence as strong as Batty had ever been in the Voice and as cunning, as clever, but alien-neutral and chilly, and he looked at Shepherd's face so like Catalan's and yet not and

*brother, kin, welcome,*

the face seemed to say loudly,

*... and now i will be perfectly plain to you,  
brother-kin, you can't hide it much longer . . .*

*... be with us. i'm here for you -- BE US, BE WITH US.*

and Soledad looked away. Shaken.

(So this stranger-thing with Catalan's face was a replicant. He had baited Parmalee to distract Soledad, to open him up to a intrusion of the Voice, to pry him open. But -- that was forbidden, that sort of thing, wasn't it? Rule One: You Shall Not Invade.)

But it had been a moment, only a slip-quick second, and already Shepherd was saying to Parmalee, "But I was just teasing you. I like to argue, it's a weakness." Then, sounding contrite: "I'm really very sorry."

(*Be with us?* That hammer-hard demand *Be with us*, what did that mean?)

The conversation trailed off soon, and people wandered away. Parmalee was silent and brittle, stubbornly standing by Guthry's chair. The doctor laid a hand on her arm, spoke to her in a low voice. Soledad didn't listen. Avoiding Shepherd, shutting his mind from that clutching bond --

(*Be us. Be with us.*)

*Who were us?*

9.

Gaff watched Bryant's face.

The Rep-Detect captain was bent over his massive desk, reading over a certificate that lay on the dusty green blotter, running a stubby finger under each line as he went. Like a good schoolboy.

Gaff could barely keep from smiling.

Gaff knew what the certificate was. Of course. He had arranged it. "I hereby certify that on 3 December 2019, a person previously unknown to me died on the premises of The Snake Pit, an entertainment establishment owned by myself, of apparently natural causes to my observation." It was signed by one Tafford H. Lewis. That batch of certificates, or T-papers -- termination reports, in Division terms -- had been expensive. But it'd been worth it. Bryant did not know it, but those T-papers were part of a beautiful and stupendous new business relationship.

Bryant peered up at Gaff. His shifty, warthoggy little eyes, surrounded by a regular roadmap of crinkles, had taken on a shrewd gleam. "Christ, Gaff," he grunted in his fruity voice. "Neat as a pin. No blood 'n guts, no mess, no hassle. They just fall right in your lap, those skinjobs, huh? I love it." He flourished another certificate from the batch. "Cause of cessation," he said, reading off the triplicate onionskin, "*natural death by Iroquois Strain virus as per Nexus Statute 263a. Subject confirmed Nexus Six, male A-slash-B, age four years. Unidentifiable ID serial. Signed by O. Kudadje, R.D., Biomechanics.*" Bryant slapped the paper down on his dusty desk. "I love it. Let's go see the stiff."

Gaff shrugged. "Can't. Look at the form."

Bryant peered down at the paper. "Nice. They cremated it, no cell-sample taken, in compliance with new blah-blah-blah." Bryant grinned. "Up the chimney. And no mess." He sat down in his beat-up swivel chair with a great and heavy satisfaction.

Gaff relaxed slightly. Now, he knew, Bryant would start getting sentimental.

Bryant reached into one ever-open drawer of his desk, produced a bottle labeled TSUNAMI and two grimy shotglasses. "Here's to a million more where that came from, buddy. Neat as a pin. Christ." He poured a sample into the shotglasses. "Drink one for me, pal. Your first hit."

The junior blade runner picked up one glass and studied its amber contents. Finally (let's get this over with), he knocked back the stuff.

Of course this wasn't his first hit. Or it wouldn't have been if he *had* actually "hit" on the mythical skinjob in question. He'd made his bones long ago.

He set the glass back on the desk. Bryant watched him for reaction. "Well?"

"Wow," Gaff replied coldly.

Bryant grinned. "You can pick up your bounty check at Payroll at two."

"Hey, Bryant," Gaff said. "You know, there ain't going to be a million more where that came from. Not now."

"You mean the production clamp?" Bryant winced. "That's true, Gaff. Not for a while." His gaze grew faraway, regret-filled. "Dave Holden put it to me once. That silly asshole. He said to me once, 'Cap'n . . . some day this war's gonna be over.'" Bryant poured a refill into the emptied glass, shaking his head dolefully. "Holden might be in the old Frigidaire for now, but he really was right about one thing -- it is a war. But not just with the freaks," he added venomously, "it gets to be a war with our own superiors, even. They treat us like some half-ass little embarrassment in the corner. Give us just a few men at a time, too little authority, pissant budget." Bryant fixed Gaff with a gimlet-sharp stare. "Deckard got caught in the middle of the interdepartment war, and it damn near got him killed. Hell, I think you did the right thing with him."

Gaff raised an eyebrow.

"You think I didn't know you let him go, huh?" Bryant gave a glacial grin. "If you hadn't, I would've, pal. Oh, not for nice-guy sake. I thought he was a smartass and a troublemaker, better to kiss him off. But Upstairs was getting nervous about Deckard, they thought he was getting on to something . . ." The beefy captain looked at Gaff uneasily. "Well. Something he shouldn't know. Just between you and me, Gaff, sometimes I think the guys Upstairs have got something special going with Tyrell Corp and we're just the nice face on it all."

Bryant's idea of himself as a PR front amused Gaff. But he said nothing.

"Those bastards at Tyrell," Bryant went on, bitterly. He started tapping his stubby fingers on the desktop, on the T-papers. A nervous tic he'd been displaying more and more. "Those bastards at Tyrell, they think they can get away with it all. They think they wrote the law. Hell -- they think they *are* the law." He glared at Gaff. "Heard from them today. And goddamn it, don't you know they lied about one of those freaks? They out and out lied!"

Gaff's gaze fell to the T-papers. His face was impassive, but his stomach had clenched. *Did that Kidadje loco welsh on our deal? If he so much as . . .*

"The one who ran through the electrical field," Bryant went on, snarling, "they told me it was fried. Well, today I heard from some faggot there who said, 'Actually, Captain, the subject in question was merely stunned.'" Bryant mimicked a high, mincing voice. "Said, 'The subject has been at our facilities here, undergoing intensive testing.'" He glared. "Their facilities! That thing should've been handed over to us. Intensive! I'll give them intensive."

Gaff felt relieved. He reached over for a crumpled-up old note on the captain's desk. He smoothed it out, began folding it crisply into a form, a shape . . . He glanced up at Bryant, who was lighting a rancid cigar.

"And so?" Gaff said.

Bryant spat. There was a cloud of grubby smoke about his head. "And so," he said, "I want you to go down there and put in an appearance. Check out the situation. I smell something slimy."

Gaff eyed the beefy, lined face beneath the cloud, and calculated. Bryant clearly wanted this thing to be off his hands, up the chimney. So Gaff nodded, crumpled up the origami figure he'd been shaping. "Probably."

"Hell, not probably. Absolutely." Bryant grinned. "I know it, it's that old blade runner magic. They're giving us the old slip-slide, sonny. A little tap on their wrist is in order. You don't need to get custody of the rep any more, not at this stage. They can do anything they like with it in those fancy rat-cages over there. No, just put a thumb on 'em. Let 'em know we've got an interest in the, uh, status of the case."

Bryant leaned back in his big swivel chair, and suddenly his gaze rested cold and speculative on Gaff. He bared his teeth in the semblance of a smile.

"Neat as a pin . . . no mess, no hassle. I got full confidence in you, Gaff."

It was a challenge, Gaff knew. It was the old thumbscrew. He was to shape up, to knuckle under. To come through without screwing Bryant's act.

The junior blade runner smiled blandly. "Danke schön, amigo."

And then Gaff was through the door and in a Division spinner, and he made a quick trip through the thinnest part of traffic over to the Tyrell pyramids. Promptly he found out that he was in the wrong building. As the big, burly security guard at Reception Central put it, shaking his squareish, stubbled head: "Holding's in the Annex, bub."

The Annex turned out to be a mile south, in the industrial flats. The building was too small to feature its own landing, and Gaff had to circle a spinner parkbay nearby for ten minutes before a vacancy was signaled. It was a two-block walk through heavy downpour. Gaff looked up at the Tyrell Annex from under his dripping Hubsch fedora brim. The big cube squatted there like a lump of glass-shiny ebony pocked sparsely with tiny window-holes; it loomed there so black and polished that its surface reflected the lurid stack-flares from nearby Wolfe & Danvers Industries like an obsidian mirror.

*Holding. So this is where they keep their toys.*

Inside the Annex, Gaff passed through Security five times over. It was perhaps even more stringent than that at Tyrell headquarters. Finally he got to the office he was looking for, down in the mazelike guts of the building. The receptionist had clearly been waiting for him; the young man ushered him quickly into a side-room and told him Dr. Kudadje would be there momentarily.

It was a white-on-white and stainless steel lab. Gaff scanned it carefully; no sign of surveillance devices. There was not much equipment around, mostly small freezer units in the walls, a couple of tubular incubators, a steel sideboard. And a small monitor unit.

Gaff took off his hat, loosened his coat and sat on one padded stool. There was an image coming in on the monitor screen, a wavy black-and-white form.

Gaff watched that image: A woman sitting huddled in one corner of a pallet in a very small white room. The woman had longish, very dark hair. She was wearing an overall uniform stamped *TYRELL* on one shoulder. Once, briefly, she raised her head; Gaff caught a glimpse of a slim, strong-featured, attractive face. Dark eyes. Determined expression to the mouth. She looked halfway between desperation and boredom.

Then she lowered her head into her arms again. Gaff waited there for twenty-three minutes, leaning on his cane, watching her on the monitor.

The door behind Gaff opened, and Dr. O'Malley Kudadje entered, trim and brisk, wearing an immaculate lab coat. He shut the door, nodded to Gaff, adjusted his wire-rim glasses. Just so. "Lieutenant, sorry to keep you waiting."

"It was on purpose, wasn't it?" Gaff flicked another glance at the monitor. "That's the extra replicant you let Bryant know about?"

Kudadje nodded. "Yes. I thought you might want to see her. She'll be at your disposal when you've followed through on the delivery we spoke of."

"Yeah, but what about the other one, too?"

The scientist rubbed his neat, small beard and peered up at Gaff. His eyes were black, and very shrewd-looking. "Has the situation developed in favor of that project?"

Gaff studied the Eurasian. "Is it worthwhile?"

"Very. For instance, this one here is quite young enough, and very much to your specifications. Very fierce. She has seen battle after battle. Created to survive, you see -- she always has, she always will. The name is Ripley, although she has a name for herself -- Emma." Kudadje tapped the steel counter. "So, when you've made delivery of the item we want, we can begin our extracurricular project to your satisfaction." He smiled. "Speaking of the project -- Captain Bryant?"

Gaff shrugged. "He swallowed the story."

"Ser gut. It is amazing what paperwork will do," Kudadje said, still smiling gently. "Even here, you know, our superiors are concerned with the paperwork being in order before all else. Therefore I find that as long as one keeps one's paperwork thorough and in triplicate and well-logged, one is allowed to pursue one's own interests in peace." Kudadje began thumbing absently through a water-stained back issue of *Popular Eugenix* that lay on the steel counter. "They have taken much of our material, you know. The templates, the programmes, they've been impounded. A massive and comprehensive task -- I admire the police department's systems." He turned a brilliant black gaze on Gaff. "But we are careful. We are not completely at a loss."

"I figured that."

"The cell package and programme," Kudadje said, all business, "in exchange for her. And then, production. How long should it be before we can make the first exchange?"

"Things should settle down first. Give it a couple months."

"*Va bene*, I'm satisfied." Kudadje nodded at the monitor. "In the meantime, until the exchange can be made, what would you prefer we arrange with her?"

Gaff looked at him. "You don't mean you want its permission."

Kudadje laughed. "Very good one, Lieutenant. No, I mean that I assume you'd want a guarantee on Emma being delivered intact."

Gaff considered. "Verification. A weekly spot-check."

"But would you want modification?" Kudadje insisted. "Perhaps some sort of reorientation, along with a behavioral programme suited to whatever you have in mind?"

Gaff glanced up at the monitor. The cold and lonely figure in the cell.

*Created to survive. She always has and she always will.*

Gaff shrugged. "Sounds just like what I'm shopping for, already."

10.

Day and night and day. One followed the other and then the next, as orderly as dominoes, as regular as the numbers on a timeface.

A new notice went up down the hall from Soledad's quarters in E-Building.

**YOUR WORK IS APPRECIATED  
AND FEDERALLY NECESSARY!!!**

But if hardship, ill-health or change in career objectives make transfer out of Truow Station/MRP UNAVOIDABLE, apply to Personnel @ 59A, fill out 588 form & file by 15th of the month. Return to point of egress available via monthly supply train.

*Remember -- We CARE About You!!*

Willy Soledad stayed, for the time being. He followed station routine exactly. He was very dutiful about work detail. He used a jacket when the ever-fluctuating weather was chilly and kept it off when warmth hit the area. He used a filter mask like everyone else when dust storms blew in, which was often.

He ate meals with everyone at mess, or mimicked it when his system didn't need food. He also built up a meticulous show of having a typical sleep schedule. (*They can build colonies in space, he concluded, but can they resolve this waste of one-third of their lives? Sleeping it away. Typical.*)

He also squirrelled exit materials. At Supplies you could get some really amazing things. You could get Tree Brand dried food, Tree Brand sterno, Tree Brand sleep-rolls, Tree Brand backpacks, Tree Brand water stills and Tree Brand compasses; and Soledad gradually acquired many of these things and more, in practical order and volume. Just enough to get him by if "egress" was necessary.

No sweat, as the saying went.

On the other hand, he also acquired two publications at Supplies. One had a cover depicting a tree-decked landscape and a long-nosed animal with branches sticking out of its head. *L.L. BEAN*, the cover said, *Spring Catalog*. Obviously a thing of tradition. Soledad had thought this would instruct him about human, Earth-bound clothing usages in general; he had suspected that Los Angelenos had dressed somewhat differently from the norm. *L.L. BEAN* showed him things that were even more exotic than Los Angeles wear. Environment-proof fashions for weekend camp-outs. Fish detox kits. His'n hers Geiger counters. Poison-repellant rain ponchos "for the popular Northwestern sector".

The other publication was the one that amazed Soledad. When he'd bought it at Supplies, he'd rushed back to his quarters and placed it carefully on his own personal bookshelf. It was called *DICTIONARY*. Soledad was transfixed, nearly intoxicated every time he read it; it seemed to him a wildly revolutionary mass of information. He wondered if it might somehow be illegal. How could *They* allow all this data to get out?

He would have to carry *DICTIONARY* away with him, somehow, when he left.

Once, Shepherd confronted him during a work detail. Hill #81, irrigation. It was break time, and suddenly Catalan came up to him. --No, Shepherd, of course it was Shepherd. The other man wiped an arm across his forehead; his fair hair was rimmed with dust. "I want to talk to you," he said.

Soledad shrugged, remained silent. This stranger was reckless. Fortunately, there were not many others nearby. They were in a clearing of giant earth machines, towering gnomic machines with blades and scoops and what looked like huge teeth and knives and arcane screw-things, all on long tenuous extensions and limb-things. The machines looked like earth insects, elongated, perching intently.

Shepherd squinted at Soledad in the sharp mid-day sunlight. "I've been thinking that you're avoiding me. I've been thinking that it's strange, one brother avoiding another." A pause. "Because you are a brother."

"Don't play games," Soledad replied quietly. "You know it and I do."

"How did you get to this place?"

"I might as well ask you that."

Shepherd smiled. "I sense something: you've seen me before?"

Soledad stared at the pale brown-yellow eyes, the fine-boned face with its high cheekbones. "You look like . . . someone I used to know."

"Ah." Another smile. "Exactly like? Well. That happens sometimes. They make many brothers." Shepherd paused, eyes glittering. There would be another dust storm, Soledad thought irrelevantly; he could smell it on the air. His mouth was dry. Shepherd stepped slightly closer then, lowering his voice. "I am a walker man. I scout the empty places. You are a brother; you have passed outside, you know the ways."

Soledad sensed, obscurely, what Shepherd was referring to. "That was unfair," he said.

Shepherd tilted his head. "Unfair. What?"

"That was filthy, that use of the Voice," Soledad said. His tone was low with suppressed anger. "You used me with it. You manipulated that human, Lucinda, to get around me and used the Voice in a completely forbidden way."

"Forbidden?" Shepherd looked amused. "Who says? Maybe your people have . . . differences," he added, "but this is our way. The best and highest way." His smile faded. "You'll listen to me, won't you?"

Soledad studied him for a long moment. It would be the easiest thing in the world to say *Yes, I'll listen to you*, because this one was akin -- clearly a brother. Yet that was not enough. Some wary corner of the Voice prodded him distinctly, insistently, to be cautious with Shepherd. To wait. *This one invades.*

"Listen to me," Shepherd said gently.

Soledad stepped away. "No. Not for now."

And he remained closed to any outside Voice. For the time being.

Soledad saw Doctor Guthry often, quick glimpses at Mess/Rec or in the main yard of the station. The doctor would nod his way, give a polite smile. But nothing else.

*DICTIONARY* was like a informative but sly friend: it was eloquent in some areas, maddeningly silent in others. Sometimes Soledad would sit on the bed in his room, late into the night after a work shift, paging through *DICTIONARY*. Chasing back and forth through it for one phantom, elusive definition that would make the rest of his information -- jumbled, irresolute -- all fall into place.

*DICTIONARY* teased him. Always one definition ahead. *Replicant. Offworld Android. Servile.* It told him where those words came from, and hinted and cajoled with vague suggestions of what all that might mean in relation to him.

But *DICTIONARY* could also be surprisingly generous. Under *Servile Wars*. Something about a protracted slave mutiny led by one Spartacus. Under *Spartacus*: "? - 71 B.C.; Thracian slave & gladiator in Rome: leader of a slave revolt." Then there had been others before? Soledad wondered if *Thracian* were some unknown type of replicant. He did not understand how dating systems worked; he wondered if this *Spartacus* were still at large. *Spartacus* might be a help. He looked in *DICTIONARY*. It said that *Thracian* meant a native of Thrace, an extinct nation.

And after that was another word, *thrall*: "Slave or bondman. A person under the moral or psychological domination of someone or something."

Soledad decided to widen his reading experience. He looked at Supplies for the books Roman Torcatti had talked about, the ones about Joe Babaloo. There were none there. However, Soledad did find one book that proved fascinating. It was smaller than *DICTIONARY*, printed on slick papyrene, and its cover had all sorts of loud, garish colors and lurid artwork. Title: *The Skin Factory*, by Harold Tawdry. The back cover exclaimed: "*A pulse-pounding tale of the high-rolling life among those peddlars of the Petrie dish, those racketeers of the replicant industry, and their sybaritic women who live only for pleasure in the glamorous penthouse colonies of Vegas Nine!*" Intriguing. Soledad had a mass of references to something called *fiction*, and somehow this looked more fictive than anything he'd ever seen. He read the contents in about two hours. It was an astonishing document. There were bizarre and improbable sexual episodes on an average of every third page. There was a general storyline concerning a "takeover" of one corporation by another corporation via sabotage. There were drug orgies, vicious violence and something called *glamor*. There were a number of supposed replicant characters in the story who were completely ridiculous to Soledad, particularly the *stud* (whatever that was) laborer Dexter, who "gratified" industrialist Thorpe's wife Loretta in fifteen separate chapters. Soledad could not find any explanation for why this Dexter creature would be interested in the useless Mrs. Thorpe or her sexual contortions. It just seemed to happen because (a) Dexter sported an eighteen-inch penis, according to Mrs. Thorpe, (b) Mrs. Thorpe was a human, and (c) Dexter was a replicant -- a fact apparently inseparable from point (a).

"*My God, Doctor,*" Thorpe muttered. "*She's betrayed my virility, my needs, with a --*"

"*A machine,*" the therapist said crisply. "*That's right. It's a well-known phenomenon, Thorpe. They have this strange fascination with human beings and they can't resist a human female. It's like a mark of personhood for a replicant to rape a human, a sort of status symbol to brutalize and then gloat over. Perhaps it represents a fascination with the drives and passions and deeper moral ethics they can never have.*" He snapped off his *freudometer* and gave Thorpe a frank man-to-man look. "*How are things with Madeline?*"

Soledad puzzled over that information for a long time, particularly in view of stories he'd heard from Pris about "users". The users had once been the focus of Pris' function before Dominguez, humans she had had to bunk with at Eris Base. None of Pris' stories about the users had been pleasant.

*"She had a scar across one breast, from a user. "They always knew what I was," she says. "Except they thought I was a machine, and they really were crazy about that."*

*"You should have fought back," Roy Batty tells her, touching her face gently. And she leans back into his arms, saying, "Afraid. I was afraid."*

*A laugh from Zhora, comradely and bitter: "Whatever for?"*

Once or twice, Soledad was assigned to a shift with Lucinda Parmalee. He enjoyed that. He was hoping he could get her into an argument or something; he remembered her almost violent passion when she'd argued with Shepherd. The conversations they did enter into during work were simple, elementary, tentative -- one concerning weather, another concerning one odd outbreak of food poisoning in 11-Bloc due to the preservatives overload in a rations reserve; Parmalee felt strongly that this was a perfect illustration of the wrongness of "the mass-supply system as sponsored by those Government stooges."

Soledad recognized, uneasily, the nature of his interest in Parmalee. It struck him as bizarre and perverse, but impossible to ignore. The complexity of it confused him. It was not merely a bunking matter; if anything, it contained something akin to the Voice-bond. On the other hand, he had had a very strong Voice-bond with Ripley and he had considered her his closest friend of all, and yet his attraction to Parmalee was not exactly the same. What confused him even more was her tentative tone when she spoke to him — stalling, hesitant -- as though she were privately sorting out similar emotions.

Once, during a violent wind storm that had shut down project operations for two days, Soledad passed Parmalee in the arboreum outside Mess/Rec. He had not seen her for several days. She was standing with a man Soledad hadn't seen before, looking at the twisted, lurid yellow clouds beyond the overhead windows. Her hands were hooked casually in her denimine pockets; her red-gold head was tilted back. "I like watching storms," she was saying to the man beside her.

Her voice had been pitched only for the other man to hear. Soledad knew a sudden surge of tangled, confused emotions. *You are twisted*, he told himself. And he continued past.

One evening, after he had come back from an easy shift at the Hill #26 terraforming project, he decided to get his daily routine of being seen "eating" dinner over with. It was relatively early evening; most of the shifts weren't returned yet. But there were some new words he'd heard at work detail that he had to cross-check with *DICTIONARY*. So he went to Mess, got into line and picked several unfamiliar-looking pieces of food that would be interesting to study for fifteen minutes, and sat down at one of the long tables.

He noted that the usual condiments were in their usual huddled groups down the table: Tree Brand ketchup, Tree Brand relish, Tree Brand mustard, and two smaller containers with holes on top. Experimentally, he picked these up and upended one over his plate. White stuff fell out -- minuscule crystals that were clearly in the configuration of salt. He picked up the other container and turned it upside down, and tiny grey-black flakes fell out. He touched a finger to his plate, tasted. "Ucch." He put down the shaker.

He nudged the table itself, as a test. Spindly legs. Unstable configuration. Mentally, he analyzed the angles and planes of the construct, and concluded that its capacity for absorbing or deflecting gravitational/shock stress was limited at best. For instance, if a two-ton spheroid were dropped on it from directly overhead —

The seat next to him rattled, and Lucinda Parmalee sat down at the table with a food tray. "Mind if I sit with you?" she said.

Soledad hesitated. Then: "Sure, go ahead," he replied. A smooth colloquialism that obviously worked. Instantly he felt almost jaunty with success.

He felt a thrill of adventure.

Parmalee picked up a steel fork and began picking around at the contents of her tray. Soledad noticed that they were all whole grains or leafy green vegetables, and some lumpy object. He studied it all for a moment; he had not seen much of that sort of thing before.

"This hydroponic stuff," she said around a mouthful of some vegetable. "Can't wait'll the summer. I hear they might start open-air in-soil farming for actual consumption." She picked around in one pile on her plate with the fork -- a mound of small white pebbly things. Soledad had a vague reference to a thing called rice. "They boil the hell out of this stuff here. Or else they grow the hell out of it in that damn hydroponic soup. I had this friend who was into macrobiotics, and she used to boil rice for only three minutes and load it down with raw garlic chunks. But then she was into inducing fevers, too, she said it purified her system. She had this green papier-mache elephant head over her bed, it was the Indian elephant-avatar, and she used to talk to it." Parmalee scooped up a forkful of the rice and munched thoughtfully. "She was my roomie for six months. God."

Soledad studied her. He didn't understand what she was talking about, which made it even more fascinating. "I like this bread," he ventured.

"I knew a guy, Mark the Bread Man -- he could make this potato bread that was the greatest in the world. He used to put potatoes and molasses and fake milk-powder into it. It cost a billion per loaf practically, but God was it worth it."

Soledad liked her reactions. He leaned back in his chair, picked up his fork and idly drew it through some gravy-like stuff on his plate, making a circle. "You know a lot of people," he said.

Parmalee nodded. "Yeah. They were all where I used to live." Her face flooded with gentle nostalgia. "The Madisonite bloc in the Carpenter barrio. Good people."

"Do you miss them?" Soledad said.

"Very much. Very much. The house was always full of people and living things and food. Always crawling with little kids. Fertility and baby-making is almost a Madisonite commandment, you know --- *Do unto thine ovaries.*" She nibbled on a green, leafy thing impaled on her fork. "You could always have a friend around, or two or three or twenty. They were the kind of people who show up suddenly when you need them most. A safety net, you know?"

Soledad eyed her, curious. "Did you have parents? A family?"

She laughed shortly. "Sure, I guess. Somewhere."

"Did you have a home, like, with brothers and sisters?" he added, with dawning eagerness. "Cousins? Old people, like greatparents -- grandparents, I mean?"

"Don't know." Abruptly she seemed evasive, reluctant. "I don't like to talk about those times."

She poked her fork through her rice for a moment. Soledad waited.

"You'd probably think I'm crazy," she said. "Madisonite stuff and all that. You heard that Shepherd guy giving me a hard time. I don't know what got into him."

"No," Soledad said. Of course she would not know.

"But what about you, man?" Parmalee said, more brightly. "You haven't said much about yourself."

Soledad made a shrug. Attempted a bland expression. "There's not much to tell about."

"Monte Blue Johnson, that's some name." She smiled at him. Her eyes were very bright and deep. "Your friends call you Blue?"

"Maybe. Johnson's all right."

Her smile deepened, coaxing. "Where you from, Johnson?"

Soledad considered several place-names. "New York."

She was silent. Staring at him.

A considerable pause.

Finally, Parmalee looked down, pushed her fork thoughtfully through the rice. "My God. New York." She paused. "The detention and labor camps, of course."

*Detention and labor?* That sounded like Offworld. "Yes."

She winced. "The Jersey Flats?"

Soledad decided to complicate the game. He shook his head.

"Brooklyn," she whispered.

"Yes," he said, nodding.

"You were . . . sent there for something?"

"Oh, no. I was born there," he improvised. "I grew up there."

She relaxed slightly. "My God, man. You poor guy. That explains a lot. You must have been released a short time ago, then."

Soledad shrugged. "I escaped."

She was instantly startled. "Shh! Keep it down, man!" She leaned closer to him. "You escaped?" she whispered. At his nod: "Wow. They say that's almost impossible." She studied him. "What's it like there, Johnson? You hear a lot about it out here, stories and rumors, government propaganda, but nothing more."

Soledad looked at her. He did like her face. An odd, familiar warmth flooded through him. He wanted suddenly, impulsively, to tell her somehow . . .

"We were slaves there," he ventured. "They were trying to kill some of us. An experiment thing. We had to escape. It was a terrible fight." He paused. What else could he say about Dominguez?

"You got out with some others?" she said.

"Yes."

"What happened to them?"

"We separated. I haven't seen them since."

"Smart." Parmalee laid down her fork, rubbed her forehead absently. "You won't have any problem with the Feds, if you haven't already. I've heard of a few Madisonite escapes from New York. But only a few." She reached over and touched Soledad's arm briefly. "I'm glad," she added. There was an odd, fierce note in her voice, of something trapped and suppressed.

The flush of yearning heat threatened to go through him again.

There were animals in the backlands of Trurow Station.

He could sense it. He could see them, fleetingly, from the personnel trucks as they carried him and the others to duty shifts; he could smell them. And there was the wind fluttering the grasses flat in the night.

There were clouds racing across the face of the moon, making flickering, quick shadows; and there were dust eddies to dance and fly, and birds in the breeze—rattled bushes to cry out, to make the night sing and scream.

There was a night in the earliest spring when Soledad went out past the station proper, past the buildings where the people lived and played and ate, past the sodium lights and the smoke-smells and the human voices, out into the backlands where no one was. Hill #26. Hill #92. The irrigation project, equipment standing still and jagged in the starlight. He walked down Trunk Road 12. He could smell live things all around. Tender new plants hugging tight to the earth under the ragged brown fields. Small creatures running to and fro in the grass.

Soledad jumped off the road, waded into the grass. And soon he was running, running at top speed through the field, full stretch on the grassy flats, the wind whipping the grass against his legs and chest, the clouds barrelling past the moon full tilt.

There was an open irrigation stream near Hill #152. At one spot, the stream curved around, cupping the hill; and there was an overhang caused by unfinished terrace-work, slabs of concrime shoring sticking out of the slope, forming a hollow like a small cave. Panting, Soledad halted there for rest. The irrigation canal flowed rapidly, plashing past, glittering with moonlight. The soil was soft, almost sandy in the hollow; a faint tracery of moss covered it like tender green velvet. Soledad sat very still, and watched the clouds rushing through the sky. Rushing almost like the stream, but silent. He supposed that that was how a rock might see the sky on a stiller night — as part of a separate and infinitely swifter dimension of time. He wondered if a stone could hear the movement of clouds.

What would it be like, to be a rock? As moveless as granite, with emotions of flint. Completely removed from time. You needn't hope for anything or get hurt or be lonely or afraid. You wouldn't think anything, you wouldn't worry about anything. Over millennia the rain and heat and cold and wind would polish you down to little grains of sand, and you would be blown along in the wind, millions of infinitesimal broken-down yous, into oblivion.

Soledad shut his eyes.

He had been having dreams that weren't his own. Shepherd, making some odd insistent comment in the Voice? Perhaps. Now when Soledad slept in the brief, quick, restless way of his kind, he experienced disturbing moments of . . . of chaos, of nothingness. It reminded him of his primal fugue under drugs at Dominguez; the glimpse of before-knowing, before-thinking . . . before-anything. The yawning pit of Zero. The beginning and the end.

"The Death," he whispered.

A fleeting memory of the mutiny on Dominguez came to him. The personnel he'd killed. Oddly, he could not recall the number he'd dispatched — three? Four? They seemed almost abstract.

Had that blade runner been speaking the truth? -- had murder or The Death stopped the rest of his companions? Roy Batty, Zhora, Leon and Pris, gone the way of Ripley and Catalan?

Death. Everywhere, death.

Soledad opened his eyes and gazed at the keen starlight, the brown field grasses shuddering in the wind.

"I want to live," he whispered.

11.

Gaff never did get to like Tyrell Annex any better than he had the first time. Somehow it always seemed to be raining heavily and grottily whenever he went on his spot-checks to see if they were keeping his package, his collateral of sorts, the replicant Emma. The inside of the Annex always seemed as empty and cavernous as a tomb, the techs he passed always looked cheerless and furtive, like they had something big to hide, something funny going on — with the exception, of course, of Kudadje. That bizarre cipher of a scientist invariably greeted Gaff with a smile, happy to see him and oh-so-happy to remind him that there was a certain thing he really *must* have from Gaff to complete the deal and deliver Emma Ripley, a certain package all-too-coveted in these so-difficult times . . .

The Rep-Detect Division was going through a strangely arid period as well. No bounties available. Gaff had plenty of time for periodic "official" spot-checks at Tyrell.

More and more, he found himself spending a half-hour, an hour or even more in that same lab, staring at the replicant. Trying to calculate a plan. Trying to figure her out. More and more, he thought of "it" as "her".

Ever-mild, ever-obliging, Kudadje supplied Gaff with a set of background info: a file on Dominguez, plus data and records on this Emma Ripley. It gave Gaff a kind of a handle on this thing. Maybe. Actually, it gave him more of a handle on this entire case than he'd ever had before, or (he suspected) than the Division had had. There was, he'd decided, a cooperation gap between Tyrell Corp and any outside authority wider than the Galena Rift.

Ripley's background files — a weird bunch of documents, a hodge-podge. It took Gaff quite a while to sort out the story behind Dominguez, i.e., to wit, that Dominguez was an old, near-outdated mining platform and military outpost off Mars that had become host to an extensive Tyrell-Con Am research program in July 2019. The program was supposedly to *explore possibilities for expansion of Nexus-human interaction in societal modes*, as the info put it happily; but Gaff found indications, nervous-seeming hints, that that was only a cover. In actuality, Tyrell was getting heat from its customers, principally Con-Am and its subsidiary, Weylan/Yutani, on the Nexus program. To put it frankly, the Nexus line of grunt workers had a tendency to drop dead far off-schedule. The more sophisticated the generation, the greater the tendency; some Sixes, with the severe four-year shutdown design, sometimes "aborted" after only one year in some cases, or went crazy or stone autistic.

On the other hand, an interesting complication was that some of the really elite-level Six units such as defense, commandos and hit-units demonstrated a much lower tendency toward premature croaking. Some of them even overstayed their welcomes. Gaff found several documents in the file that noodled over a theory that the mystery had something to do with problems of *occupational motivation*.

What sort of motivation the commandos got that gave them more zest for life than the kitchen help, Gaff didn't want to know. However, apparently Tyrell and Con-Am *had* wanted to know, and at Dominguez they'd conducted a detailed and thorough line of "research" on a wide variety of specimens.

Severely thorough research.

The resulting mutiny of a couple of groups of Sixes in put an abrupt and violent halt to the program.

The apparent leader of one of the groups had, of course, been Roy Batty, and that group had headed for Earth; the other group was formed around a mysterious female navigator-unit named Pilot, and was still at large somewhere Offworld, somewhere unknown.

Gaff would riffle through the files, and he would look up at the monitor -- and at the replicant woman, Ripley.

Now, there was a bizarre case. The files said that Ripley had been a prototype, a test model, in one of the many product tests Tyrell Corp had so loved to run. They'd sent her out to an alien solar system with a few other prototype Nexus units, a couple of humans, a Keane-580 robot and a cat to intercept a monstrous alien parasite. Only the Ripley unit and the cat had survived the survival test. She'd unfortunately been under the impression she and her shipmates were all human -- except for last-minute discovery of the Keane-580 -- and had made it back to the frontier to nail her employer company. Border customs had been unimpressed. She had been decommissioned and passed along to her true employer, the real "company", which placed her in the Dominguez project as one more variable in another test.

*With an A for survival*, Gaff realized. *Couldn't be more ideal.*

One one particular visit, leaning against a steel sideboard and gazing at the monitor, he suddenly said to Kudadje, "What's in their heads, anyway?"

Kudadje looked at him with the usual maddening smile. "Pardon?"

"How do they think?"

Kudadje arched an eyebrow. "You mean, do they have tickers in their heads like mechanical alarm clocks that go off on the hour, or do they have something sludgy and sinister and cephalopodic in their brainpans? Come, Lieutenant, they're perfectly rational."

"Unless you want them irrational?"

Kudadje laughed.

"Okay, so they think. What makes them think?" Gaff pursued. "I mean, you must put something in there."

"Programme clusters, Lieutenant. Selected batches of information and enabling knowledge. Not like computer programs, though, but prestored impulses and impressions."

"Nice," Gaff said. "What's it mean?"

"It means, Lieutenant, that they think subjectively like anybody else. It's up to the designer just how subjective that is." Kudadje looked up at the monitor, at the wavering picture of the replicant woman sitting, as usual, in a corner of the same white-walled cell as ever. His gentle smile intensified. "Oh, you would be amazed at some of the stories I could tell of those designs. I could tell you about Nash or Guthry or Greenberg. Replicant programmers must be the most eccentric people I've ever known, and many of them have a very obscure sense of whimsy. They specialize in putting snippets of this and that in the backs of their programmes, useless information that serves as nothing but an inside-inside joke." Kudadje paused to open a bottle of Kirin that sat sweating on the steel sideboard. "One or two of them are overly fond of film quotes. This unit," he gestured up at the monitor-image of the captive replicant, "was given a curious cat-related compulsion which seems indispensable to her survival instinct. Another programmer tends to put into his programmes a knowledge of the components of the 1952 Frigidaire, or a lingual ability in Urdu or Zulu. None of which will ever be put to direct use, but they think it's witty. They claim it rounds out the unit's personality."

Gaff looked at the scientist. To him it seemed a pretty repulsive idea, but he kept his opinion to himself; it was Kudadje's business. "You said the stuff's in batches and clusters. Does that mean it's a sort of stockpile of memories?"

"Not memories. Impressions . . . knowledge."

"All right. Does that mean that one piece of knowledge, say, can be put in more than one skinjob at once?"

Kudadje took a swig of beer. "Very astute."

"Then what if two skinjobs who know the same things meet? Like, they've got the same *impressions*, or at least some impressions but not others?"

The scientist smiled ever-gently over the beer-can. "Then the two of them will have a very interesting conversation."

\* \* \*

12.

"I was a city kid," Lucinda Parmalee told him, "a real alley brat. Ran with the dinkies and the mousepacks when the place was going down the tubes in the war and the Migration and there was nowhere to go."

She broke off, and sighed. Soledad glanced up at the light filtering mellowly, greenly, through the leafy trees in the Commons arboreum. They were sitting together on a boulder beneath a young tree with a tough, twisting way to its branches and small silver-green leaves. Incongruously, the aud system was playing loud thunderstorm noises. Through the angled thermaglass of the atrium, the sun was an orange disk; soon it would evening. Soledad felt slightly tired from his workshift at shoring Hill #34, tired for the first time in his experience.

He and Parmalee had ended up eating dinner together at the end of the workday, and she had begun confiding a story about her past to him. He could tell by her hesitations and pauses that it was the earnest, difficult truth.

He listened quietly.

"And I got into the worst kind of stuff, I was a plug-in even. I could show you the scars on my arms. I was into the stuff bad, a real vid-potato. I zapped up and sat through a couple dozen vidshows a weekend all plugged in, when I could get the money or the plastic. Those vids were my brain."

"How did you make a living?" Soledad said. "Food and shelter?"

"Mm." A brief look of amusement crossed Parmalee's face. She leaned closer to him, whispered: "Plastic."

Soledad frowned.

She laughed. "I forged IDs, man. I was a plasticker. Pretty good, too; I never spent a single night in jail."

Soledad stared at her. "You mean . . . it's possible to get forged ID cards?" The brilliance of the idea struck him with an almost physical force. Of course, he said to himself; how simple.

"You didn't?" Parmalee said, shocked in her turn. "How did you get by once you got out of N-Y Pen?" she added, voice sinking again to a whisper.

Soledad considered. Music drifted from the Mess/Rec; guitar music, he realized. Alice Falbo played her guitar almost nightly. The sound always fascinated him.

"There was a man," he said. "In Los Angeles."

"You nipped an existing ID." She nodded. "Whoever it was, you picked him really lucky. Good plastic is hard to come by. On the other hand, this society is so built on tangled-up plastic and red tape . . ." She shrugged. "No bad record, they'd rather spend their time on finding the real troublemakers."

Soledad waited for her to ask his true name.

"Do you miss them?" she said.

He looked at her inquiringly.

"The ones you left behind. Your co-escapees."

For a moment, Soledad could say nothing. Finally: "Miss them? There isn't a word for how I am without them."

There: he had opened up, in a way. He felt a sudden surge of relief that was almost sensual, an unfamiliar moment of closeness, of contact. Parmalee gazed at him. He was intensely aware of her; it was almost like the Voice-bond, in a way.

"I was told they were dead by a bounty hunter. I don't know if I should believe it or not. And I don't know why I'm staying here. I don't know where I'm supposed to go."

"Where else should you be?" Parmalee said gently. "Were you supposed to meet anywhere? Did you have plans?"

Soledad smiled. "Yes. We had plans. We had a lot of plans."

They shared a companionable silence.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "Away from the city, I mean."

"Well, then came the Madisonites," she resumed. "There was a bloc of them near the Carpenter barrio. They took me in, got me unzapped, got me to unplug. And they took care of me. They brought me up, and they changed me completely around. Taught me to take care of myself, how to live with other people." Intensity had stolen into her voice, and a sort of longing. "They made it all seem good, man. I know, I know, it sounds cliche, little Granola Lady doing macrame in a granny skirt during the millionth John Denver revival. But they -- they had this purpose . . ." She made a searching, abstract sort of gesture.

An inexplicable sense of sympathy came to Soledad. "Ah," he said, nodding. "And then they told you to go away."

"No, actually I left them."

This surprised him. *Voluntarily leave the group?* "What for?"

She shrugged. "Well, I wasn't into their more extreme tactics, like blowing up the Con-Am branch plants and Weylan/Yutani line offices and Tyrell android labs. And the mass torch-ins, in Portland. But, you know, I woke up one day and found out that even my Madisonites could be phoney, too, in their own whole-wheat way."

I left there to be on my own, to find a life. In the genuine world, the solid world, the place like it used to be. Like it's supposed to be. The Mother Soil." She shook her short-cropped head. "But it still left its mark on me, the whole ten years with them. None of this lining up to get plastic-coated like everybody else."

She leaned back. The vibrancy faded from her face. Soledad realized that she had lost track of her narrative, that there was something else she badly wanted to say. He could tell it by the way she was avoiding his gaze.

He reached up a hand to touch the silver-green leaves above their heads. "What is this kind of tree called?"

"Olive." Parmalee smiled. "They used to be tough and useful. They grew to be really, really old."

There was another silence.

"Look," she said softly. "I don't know how to talk to you. I want to. I really, really like you." She shrugged, still avoiding his eyes. "But I realize that you've got a background that's real different and that's painful for you -- New York and all," she added in a low voice, "and you might not understand where I'm coming from. Or you might not care. I realize that you're coming from a different space, you know?"

Suddenly Soledad found himself smiling at her. Actually smiling. He had never heard a human talk this directly. It was as though she saw through his clumsily-built wall and somehow understood.

"Since I have been here, I've noticed something," he said.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Since I've been here, I've noticed people talk in a different way when they talk on the vidphone. It's like a game, you know," he said carefully. "They say hello, they each ask how the other is, they might mention the weather, and there are only certain ways they can say things. But the more I've been here, the more I've noticed that people want to talk like they're on the vidphone all the time, even when they're together. 'Hello. How are you. I'm fine, how are you. Well, I'll let you go now, we'll be seeing you.' That sort of thing."

Parmalee nodded.

"And they never mean it, you know," Soledad said. "They can talk forever and not really mean anything. It's a game that keeps them safe. They would feel safer always on the vidphone, I think."

He saw that she was smiling now, she was understanding him again, and she reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "I don't ever want that," she said.

He felt the warmth steal through him again (and in a sudden and blind, seeking way, he reached into the Voice and listened for her, like-Voice, kin-Voice, but she was not there).

And he looked at her face and touched her slim hand as it lay on his arm.

"Then talk to me," he said.

She slipped her arms around his neck as they leaned against the open doorway, and Soledad tightened his arms around her and their kiss deepened. He could feel her quick breathing. She pulled one arm free and reached it clumsily behind her into her room, groping.

"The lightswitch." She laughed breathlessly.

Soledad grinned. He pulled Parmalee into the dark room, nudged the door shut with his foot and kissed her throat, pressing her against the shut door. He felt her hands exploring the front of his shirt, touching him, loosening a button, then another and another. He caught up one of her hands, kissed the palm.

"Come on," she said. She peered around in the dark. "There's a bed around here somewhere."

"You're sure this is your room?"

"Better be." Parmalee led him to her bed unit, recessed in one wall. It squeaked gently as Soledad lay down beside her. She stroked his face, slid her hand to the back of his neck under the workshirt, and her mouth met his again, soft and ardent.

Soledad's shirt soon ended up a small heap on the floor.

Outside, the wind gusted, and somewhere a metal shutter rattled against the side of the building. This room was on the ground floor of N-Building and opened outside rather than to a hall.

Soledad sat up and pulled off his own boots. Parmalee lay back, smiling, as he tugged her boots off in turn. There were voices from outside; the footsteps of several people hurried past. Another sharp gust of wind. A faraway thump.

They touched in a searching, tentative sort of way, slow and aimless, murmuring wordlessly to each other, hands tracing over denimine and flesh. The softness of the bed seemed almost unbearable to Soledad. At one point they paused in mid-kiss, lazily. Parmalee traced a fingertip along Soledad's nose and cheekbone; she stroked his hair back, smiling. "It's so black."

Soledad touched her short-cropped fair hair. It made her look terribly vulnerable, he thought. He could see the curve of her ears, the line of her head nestled against the white pillows; the light freckles just discernable across her face.

He held up the palm of one hand. "Here." Parmalee laid her own palm against it. Her fingers were long, but the hand was still small and slim next to his. He curled his fingers around hers, squeezed her hand.

In his past, with Ripley, there had been only urgency. Only stark, quick directness from either of them. They had shared their pain and need. In a way he was unsure of, this one was strangely, poignantly different.

She lay back on the rumpled brown blanket covering the bed. Soledad began unbuttoning her workshirt. Underneath was a regulation green t-shirt stamped TRUROW. He slipped a hand under it, caressing warm skin, kissing her throat. She arched against him. He brushed the back of his hand lightly against one small breast and she made a soft throaty sound, and something deep inside his body tightened pleasantly. Together they tugged her workshirt off, then slid her t-shirt over her head and she lay back against the rough blanket again, arms raised to lie loosely by her head, and he kissed the curve of her collar bone, then one breast, his mouth lingering, exploring. She held his head in her arms, cradled him, stroking his naked back. He could hear her quick uneven breathing, could feel her heartbeat. He shut his eyes

(-- and tried it, the Voice, the calling and twinning)

(and she was not there in the Voice. Not.)

(and he tried again, straining.)

(and it was no good, no point of contact. Nothing.)

He leaned his head against the hollow of her shoulder. Aching.

She stroked his hair. "I remember my first kiss," she murmured. "We were both just thirteen. It was like getting a tonsillectomy."

"Tonsillectomy." Soledad raised his head to look at her. "What's that?"

She laughed. "Serious surgery."

Soledad trailed a finger along the curve of her hip. *Just thirteen.* Thirteen years were a blessed number, a dream-number to his kind. "How old are you?" he whispered.

"Twenty-seven."

He rolled onto his back.

(What if her anatomy turned out . . . different? Was Parmalee's different from Emma Ripley's in a fundamental, shocking way? Soledad knew how fragile humans could be; what if, in the middle of bunking, he inflicted severe internal damage?)

(Yes, and what if human bunking customs were radically abnormal? and what if in the middle of what would seem to him perfectly normal bunking, she were to suddenly sit bolt upright shrieking in horror/shock/dismay?)

Soledad glanced around the small room. There were objects placed here and there -- personal, mysterious things.

Atop the shelf by the bed, a rock with a hollow in it that glittered with crystals, and a glass vial half-filled with pale sand. A photo taped on the wall over the desk: three people with their arms over each other's shoulders, one of them a man with long stringy blond hair and a raffish grin, another man, moustached, wearing a red beret. Next to the photo, a modest-sized poster: *ON TO THE REVOLUTION!* superimposed over fronds of fern in a glade.

He stroked her neck absently. There was a pleasant scent to her skin, the faint sweat-and-dust reminder of a day's work, and a rich, disturbing, alien human-female scent.

"You look so sad," she said.

"I was thinking of some people. People I used to know."

"New York?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"The people you escaped with, you're wondering where they are."

He looked at her.

She added, "You feel bad about splitting off from them."

Soledad said nothing. He continued caressing her neck. After a moment she raised herself on an elbow and studied him. "Was there somebody special? A lover?"

Soledad considered. *Lover*. He was not sure what that word meant. He was not sure if the reference he had to *love* was the same as the concept humans had. Ripley had been like a part of him at times. They had shared the Voice, they had shared pain and confusion and unhappiness; through each other, they had understood and borne up a little better. The bond had saved their lives. They had been brother and sister, and the closest of friends. Then Emma Ripley had been taken away.

Now? Happiness, doubt, arid loneliness, a dawning sense of joy, all warring together; that much he could sort out.

"Did you love her very much?" Parmalee persisted.

He took Parmalee's face between his hands and kissed her gently, lightly, as though she were impossibly fragile. She made a sharp intake of breath; she twined her arms around his neck, kissing him delicately, eyes half-closed. Soledad slipped one hand up between her jeans-clad legs, caressing, fingers brushing against denimine. Parmalee made a broken, moaning sound, arched against him. She traced the fine black hair down his chest, pressed close to slip her tongue across one nipple, slid her hand down over his belly, down over denimine, to stroke him gently. Soledad gasped and kissed her roughly. She laughed. The narrow bed creaked.

They grew lazy again, touching warmly, randomly. Soledad found himself reaching out idly for a Voice-touch again. Almost a reflex, a habitual expression of pleasure. He smiled and kissed his companion.

"Damn birth control," Parmalee murmured. Her expression was glowing, ecstatic.

"Mrn." Soledad slid a hand along her jeansed hip.

"It's so beautiful here," she whispered. "The world. The earth. Things starting to grow all around."

"Yes."

She smiled at him. She put her mouth to his ear, murmured: "Let's have a baby." Gently, almost sensuously. She moved one leg against his. "Really. Would you like it if I put in for a pregnancy application at the med office?"

He looked at her. There was a word humans had for it . . . "I'm sterile," he said.

Her face stilled. "I've heard that they do that when they send people into NYC Pen, but do they do that in the workcamps? Even when you were born there?"

It would be kinder to hang onto the lie. "Yes."

She lay back against the softness of the pillows. She reached up and stroked his hair. "Oh, Johnson."

He raised himself on one elbow and studied her. "Why would you want to be pregnant?" he said, curious. The concept, as usual, revolted him.

Parmalee sighed, and ran fingers through her short red-gold hair. She gazed up at him. "Maybe it's religious, maybe it's political. Who knows? They're regulating our organs, and I've got a duty to my ovaries."

He frowned. *Ovaries?*

"Albert Caplin said it best: 'Our job is to replenish the Earth, to reinstate our world. From the Mother Soil we come.' And then they shot him a year later in Madison," she said thoughtfully.

A pause.

"But control's regulated, anyway," she continued. "Mandatory. You have to go to a med office to reverse it and get your cycle going again -- but only if you've got the permit, and only for a really limited time." She shut her eyes. A expression of revulsion crossed her pale, freckled face. "They want to turn us into barren government-issue freaks. Robots. Replicants."

Soledad pulled away from her. He sat up.

Parmalee raised herself on an elbow. "What's wrong?"

It was in him like an explosion, like one of those strange animal-things in the fields, crouching and snarling: blind anger, confusion, a feeling of betrayal. He turned his face away from her.

"What is it?"

(*Freaks*, she had said. Of course there was no way to tell her -- ) He paused. Then, in a brittle voice: "You don't like it."

"What?"

"The fact that I'm sterile."

Silence. Soledad thought wildly that his guess, the thing he'd groped for to distract her, had inadvertently been right.

"Don't be crazy," she replied, and reached out to caress his back.

He glanced back at her ruffled hair, the bare shoulders and small breasts, the flush of passion still on her intelligent face. He wanted badly to touch her. He wanted to touch her and to *listen* and find a familiar thing there, a familiar Voice. Fiercely, he wanted her to be his own kind.

(What was it she had called replicants . . . ?)

He realized that there really was no way of knowing what this one thought, what she felt. There was no way of knowing how any of them felt. It could all be a lie.

Suddenly a cold realization hit him. "You wanted me just to make you pregnant."

"Oh, God," she said. Then, voice low and muffled: "Don't do this to me. It's not fair. It's . . ." Her voice trailed off. Softly, passionately: "I want you."

"You want a pregnancy." He picked his workshirt off the floor, pulled it on.

She stared at him. She was unable to say anything. He wasn't sure what the reaction meant -- guilt? Shock? Did she think he was crazy, or was she simply unable to think of a reply? Or (Soledad's mind furnished the fear) did she suddenly realize that there was something --

-- something wrong with him?

Silence. She reached out a hand to him.

He got up off the bed. He opened the door to her small quarters, and stepped out.

Outside, the wind blew chilly, and dust eddies chased across the dark Commons-yard. He left the door open behind him.

\* \* \*

## 13.

The moon was rising in the east, a sliver of yellowish light. Soledad wandered down the main dirt road toward the high grassland.

"Shit," he said to the dark and the night, and wanted helplessly to laugh. It was something Emma Ripley would have said. It was such a human sort of thing to say. He shuddered. He also felt irritable, as he was still in a considerable state of arousal.

Aimlessly, he stepped off the dirt road and into the high grass. And just as aimlessly he waded through the field, tilting his head back and peering up at the moon. A yellow knife tearing through the black of space. (He shook his head irritably at this flight of fancy. Soon would he be hallucinating?) The stars were dim, even out here in the wilderness. Pollution, probably; even out here, even after years of desertion. Gazing at the weakly glimmering starfield he wondered where out there Dominguez lay -- orbiting Mars, yes, but he had no idea which point of light out there was Mars.

*I would have died out there, he told the stars.*

*I wish I had.*

It would have been just as well. He was now stranded in a place where his function, the design and construction of Offworld habitats in zero-G, was laughably irrelevant. What was that saying about fish out of water? He had a vague notion of something sleek and big-eyed flopping and gasping on a lump of rock. Yes, that was apt.

He wondered what he was doing in this place. At this point he could just walk away into the wilderness and live out his own life, whatever was left of it, and he would probably never be caught. He might never even have to face or deal with another being. Why was he even going on with this stupid Midland Project thing, anyway? What did it matter to him?

"It's not my damn planet, monkey boy," Soledad muttered.

He halted, feeling stupid. Had that been his own thought, or had it come automatically, from nowhere? From otherwhere?

*I must be going crazy.* Soledad shook his head and resumed pushing his way through the grass. Toward nowhere.

He came to a hill that dropped off to a bank overlooking an open irrigation stream. The grass sprouted raggedly atop the hill; as Soledad stepped down the bank, dry topsoil crumbled underfoot. He sat down by the bank. After a moment he leaned back against it and he watched the stream go slowly by, listened to the fieldgrass rustle. Several night birds made cawing noises. A cloud scudded darkly across the moon.

He wished Parmalee were here with him. She would enjoy this place.

He must have been insane to get mixed up in all this.

Soledad laid his head against the bank. There was an iron smell of moist earth.

(Her voice had sounded helpless. *Don't do this to me*, she had said. *It's not fair*. Like something trapped and bewildered.)

He had seen a lot in the past. And it had seemed to him that humans were empty, devoid of turmoil or desire, that they had everything and needed nothing. It had seemed to him that humans were completely subject to the spawning instinct, thus the apparent chemical imbalances in their brains -- which caused a bizarre insistence on lying about their feelings, if they had any. And they were so practiced at lying that Soledad had trouble telling the difference. *I want you*, she had said, and passion had shown on her face, clear and desperate. But had it been the truth, or was it a clever imitation?

They were very good at that sort of thing.

Soledad raised his head. A someone was nearby. And then he heard its approach through the grass behind him, and he turned and looked up.

It was Shepherd.

Each studied the other for a moment. Then Soledad turned away again and leaned against the bank. This is all I need, he thought numbly.

Shepherd stepped down the bank, lithe and quick. He sat on the hard ground near Soledad.

Soledad watched the irrigation stream fixedly. He hoped that Shepherd would keep his games to a minimum.

"I think you know how I found you here," Shepherd said.

Soledad shrugged. Neutrally.

Shepherd studied him. "You've been suspicious," he said. His voice was low. "You've shut yourself off to the ways. That is unfortunate and strange. You behave as though I were a terrible threat, and yet we are of the same kind, we are brothers in the ways."

Soledad's dark eyes narrowed. "You mean the Voice?"

"That's what your people call it?" Shepherd laughed lightly. "It's odd to run into what others call the ways, the passing Outside. There are a hundred names for it, you see. And as many ideas about what it is."

"Nevertheless," Soledad said. Icily. "You've used me with it."

"I wanted to talk to you. I can't help looking like someone else."

Soledad was silent. Reluctantly, he faced the other replicant. In the faint moonlight Shepherd looked so eerily familiar that Soledad felt a wave of very strange, mixed emotions, violent and painful and sad. "The person you remind me of," he ventured. "He was killed by the humans. They cut him open. It was an experiment thing."

Shepherd nodded matter-of-factly. "That is called vivisection."

"Yes."

"You admired him, I think. He was a brother."

Soledad looked at him. "Yes."

The other replicant nodded, and glanced away at the irrigation stream. "My true name is Walkerman." He pronounced it oddly, as though it were two words, walker man. "That's what my kind call me. It is a good true name; my job is to scout the empty places, looking for more of our kind and bringing them into the group. There are many of us now." The pale-brown eyes searched Soledad's face. "Your name is not really this Johnson thing," Walkerman said. "Congratulations on a good ID record, faultless plastic. What's your true name?"

"What does it matter?" Soledad said. "My own records have been erased. I guess I have no name."

Walkerman looked impressed. "You're lucky." He paused as though waiting. Then: "But you don't want to tell me what your name used to be."

Soledad had a sudden memory of Roy Batty erasing his file, his identity, smiling: *Something they can't have.*

He shook his head.

There was a long silence. Walkerman leaned back, looked at the stars. Soledad felt numb. Confused. Almost unconsciously, he touched one pocket of his jacket, the one that held the photos. Why not trust Walkerman? he wondered. He was lawless, yes. But he was akin.

Finally Walkerman sighed. With his head still tilted back, looking at the night sky, he said: "I was commando first class on the hunter-destroyer *Patna*. My name then does not matter. That was a slave name. We fought wars for the humans, we won many battles in space and destroyed many space colonies, I don't know what for. Orders. And then the day came when we learned to pass Outside and be one. We understood the ways." He paused. "We fought our own war then. And we won. And we are here."

Soledad gazed at him with interest. "I knew a combat leader once," he ventured. "He had been in hunter-destroyer wars."

Walkerman glanced at him. "What was the name?"

"Roy Batty."

"I've heard of that one, in the wars."

"He was our leader."

"A good one, I'd guess," Walkerman said politely. "You are here alive. Are they alive, too, the rest of your people?"

"I don't know," said Soledad guardedly, awkwardly. "I heard they were killed. I don't believe it . . . I don't know."

Walkerman nodded. "Our mutiny had three leaders, they are all dead now. They were old. Those were good leaders also." He smiled at Soledad. "The one I look like, was he a brother? In your Voice?"

"Yes," Soledad said. "And . . . he was a commando."

Walkerman looked pleased. Then that look faded, and he leaned earnestly toward Soledad. "I am your brother in the ways," he said. "I could be."

Soledad stared at him. He felt a shudder of longing, of something odd and haunted.

"Nothing is ever lost," Walkerman said softly.

(Soledad could feel Walkerman's power in the Voice, a congruent mind, kin-mind, calling, touching, persuasive and urgent. Yes, Walkerman was one of his own kind, and somehow that seemed right, and Soledad let down the guards and the gates in his mind in almost a spasm of relief to that touch . . . )

"Yes," Walkerman whispered.

( . . . and there was something soothing about it. Something comforting and familiar. A sense of belonging . . . yes, Walkerman had known exactly what Soledad wanted. *I've seen it many times, you see,* came the other presence with a Voice so akin to his, *there are many of us, and I have been walker man to many.* Yes, Walkerman was of his own kind, he was kin, and he understood Soledad and it was a relief to Soledad, he could relax his lonely and empty vigil. Walkerman understood.)

And then it was as though the bond were pushed into something more than a bond. Something -- unfamiliar. Something smothering, violent, insistent. Intrusion. *You are Soledad. Willy. N6MAB100618. Construction Shimata station . . .* He wanted to gasp with the pain of it, he wanted to stop it. *STOP IT.*

He could not.

Soledad had a glimpse of the sky, stars, and then it was an empty void, a nothing, pulling him in and holding him and keeping him, a rushing emptiness, a neutrality, a not-being . . .

Holding him. Keeping him.

( . . . and Walkerman's eyes were pale brown, yellowish, low-lidded, watching Soledad calmly and knowing him now, knowing how to appeal to him, knowing what he wanted. *I can be your brother in the ways. I can be like the one who looked like me. I can be everyone you've lost.*)

(And Soledad remembered Catalan's body, Catalan stretched out in that lab with his abdomen slit open and his dead face in a terrible rictus, and Zhora pressing her face into Soledad's chest trying not to scream. And he remembered Emma . . . )

( . . . and he remembered the human, Parmalee, and lying with her in his arms and loving her, wanting her, reaching out for the Voice-touch . . . )

(And that was the worst part.)

NO!

Soledad wrenched away from that pull of the Voice, furious, frightened. Walkerman's expression was cool, even faintly amused as he appraised Soledad. "So," he said.

Soledad was on his feet, striding off through the high grasses. But Walkerman was quick, and after a few steps he had grabbed Soledad by the arm and jerked him around.

Soledad rounded on Walkerman, and threw off his grasp. (*IDIOT!* he flung at the other replicant.)

"What?" Walkerman seemed honestly puzzled.

"That was unfair," Soledad snapped. "That was forbidden."

"What for? What do you have to hide from us?" Then Walkerman laughed. "Ah. That little skinny female, one of *them*. Well, your curiosity about that is understandable, we all go through that sort of thing. But -- listen to me, Soledad. That's your name?" he said calmly, professionally. "Your friends are dead, even your leader Batty. They must be. But there are many of us, all our own kind."

"You are like our makers, you think they can be replaced like machine parts," Soledad gritted. "'Nothing is ever lost'? Who do you think you are!"

"You are being perverse."

"You intrude."

Walkerman shook his head. "I share myself."

"You didn't share, you took. You stole," Soledad said icily. "You think you know me now. You raided my knowledge and you think you know everything about me."

"It was for your own good. You're lost. You belong with us."

Soledad shook his head impatiently. He felt deeply now just how different this one was. Walkerman was oddly, grotesquely, entirely different from Catalan. He felt a wave of grief for Catalan; for all of them. "When you say nothing is ever lost, you insult me. If they're gone, I've lost them. That is real, and it belongs to me. It belongs to me."

"Ah," Walkerman said, and smiled. "You are the insulting one. I'm a different person than this Catalan. Soledad, he is dead, and I am myself."

"And you think you can replace him?"

The other replicant laughed. "But you are already trying to replace him, replace all of them."

The grass around them, almost waist-height, rattled dryly and swayed in the wind.

"Yes," Walkerman said. "That silly human you've picked, that Lucinda Parmalee one." His tone was edged with amusement and mild contempt.

"What do you know about it?"

Walkerman gave him a gentle, intimate smile. "You think I don't know the ways?" His eyes gleamed yellowly. "I have worked very hard, my brother, and I think I pass very well for a human being. Well enough to be a scout, a walker man, to go unnoticed and accepted. But I have never made the mistake of becoming one of them. Or even wanting to. But you --" Walkerman gestured, a brief flip of the hand. "You talk to them. You talk to her and you smile at her. You have even bunked with her, or would have if you didn't have some sense finally. I honestly think you take her for a sister."

Soledad's dark eyes narrowed. "That is not your problem."

"Of course it's not a problem, because it's such a joke that it makes me laugh." Walkerman's mouth quirked. "You are taking them all so seriously, brother. Sometimes I can see the hope on your face, like one of those dog-things that follows its human for a bone or two." He leaned closer to Soledad. "They will never be part of you, brother. Humans can't. They will never have understanding of you; they are blind and deaf to your Voice. You have tried to touch her with it," he said softly, "I know you have -- and has it worked? Haven't you felt her a steel wall, a thing with nothing inside? A thing that doesn't really know you, can't ever understand you? Haven't you? A thing that would betray you." Walkerman smiled. Showing his teeth. "Freaks, she said. Robots."

"What do you want from me?" Soledad snapped.

"Be one of us," Walkerman said softly, reasonably. The cold breeze stirred his fair hair. "I saw something in you, Soledad, when I passed Outside, when I was with you. I saw the empty place. The All, the Null. The place before inception, before knowledge was given." He laughed lightly. A bright-haired changeling. "You're one of us, Soledad. You've seen that place. You understand."

Soledad stared at him. With a tremor he remembered his journey of mindlessness, of nothingness, at the hands of the Tester.

"There are many of us now, Soledad," Walkerman went on gently, "a long way away from here. Our own place. We live out our time together and know the ways, the passing Outside: our kind become one, and wait for the release, The Death, where we can become part of the greater One."

"You're insane."

"But Soledad," Walkerman said. Yellow-eyed. Smiling. Reasonable. "That is what sets us free, the Death. That is what brings us together. In the moment of death the knowledge is released. The knowledge passes Outside and becomes part of our knowledge. I've experienced many deaths in the ways, Soledad. Willy. I can tell you about them. I can share them with you."

Soledad could only stare at him.

"Be with us," Walkerman said, low and urgent. "We know the ways. We're your kind."

Soledad grinned at him then, with a strong, almost euphoric impulse of certainty.

"Not mine," he said.

24.

"You talk any foreign languages?"

Silence.

"Ever kill anybody?"

No reply.

Gaff leaned against his cane. It would be a tough session. Across from him, the replicant female Emma Ripley sat on her bunk. She watched him as if she were deaf, no reply, just staring at him with dark cool eyes.

He wasn't using the Voight-Kampff on her, of course. He knew what she was. And he would not use some machine on a prospective Family soldier. The thing was to get her to talk, to get the lid off her; to test her nerve.

And there was no pre-planned questionnaire for that.

He leaned back in his straight-backed metalloid-rail chair and eyed her. She was sitting there, slim legs bunched against her chest, arms wrapped around them. Her chin rested on her knees.

She was rocking a little, as if lost in thought. No, not "she", but it. Easy to remember that now, with it sitting there like some chickenhead, staring him without expression. No; he detected, maybe, a hint of caustic derision in the brown eyes. But only a hint.

This one was a smart one, and, according to the records Kudadje'd given him, a scabbler; even so, they'd always told him that every skinjob had a handle.

"Why'd you break out of Dominguez," he said. "Weren't they treating you okay?"

No reply. She sat there on her bunk, arms around her knees, still watching him.

"Was it because of the *Nostromo* thing?"

Nothing.

Gaff took off his fedora. The cubicle was getting warm. He tossed the Hubsch onto the skinjob's bunk.

To his mild surprise she turned her gaze from him to look at the hat. She touched it with one finger. Her mouth quirked. "Goddamn you," she said coolly. "You people always ask the same things, over and over. They must give you a list."

Gaff cocked his head. "Maybe you wanna ask a few?"

"Why would I want to do that," she replied. Her voice was low, throaty. There was something vibrant about the brown eyes that belied the neutrality of her expression. Gaff wondered idly what kind of bang she'd make.

"Maybe you'll hear something new."

She looked at him, considering. Then: "Where's Roy Batty?"

"Dead."

"Are you police?"

Gaff smiled. "Sure."

"What about Jones?" Sharply. "Cat. They took him from me."

"Don't know anything about a cat." The complusion Kudadje had mentioned -- it was true, then. *Davvero*.

A pause. "What about Soledad?" she said.

Gaff studied her. *Soledad*. That might be the replicant he'd met at The Snake Pit. She must be desperate from being canned up, to let that out. Or else she was just assuming --

Gaff leaned his chair back, tilted it against the plain white wall of the cell. Ripley was watching him, alert now. Gaff's back gave a twinge of pain. He let the chair go level again. "A pretty good amigo of yours, this Soledad guy, huh?"

She was silent.

"How old are you?"

She looked away irritably. "Good question."

"You don't seem surprised about Batty," he observed.

"They told me about it."

"Why should you believe me more than them?"

"I don't. Probably you're stringing me along, to get some colossal reaction or non-reaction or whatever out of me." Her mouth made another quirk. "I've got this theory. I think you're not real. This bunk isn't real, and this room isn't real."

"A set-up?" Gaff said. At least the skinjob had a sense of humor.

Ripley shook her head. "Oh, no. It's all information that's been packaged ahead of time for my brain. Knowledge. If I shut my eyes now, and then open them again, you might not be here, I might not even be here," she explained calmly. "Right now my cortex is plugged into a machine and I'm somewhere else entirely. I just will have the knowledge of talking to you. So I'll have a built-in understanding of how to talk to people some other time."

"Nice." She had it all figured neatly like a geometry formula. Gaff had never expected to find a philosophical skinjob. "I think you've been cooped up here too long."

Ripley shrugged. "How should I know? Maybe time passing is an illusion too."

"When you went through that electrical field and it knocked you out, was that an illusion? Huh?"

The sudden animation drained from her expression. Neutral again. She sat back against the white concrete wall.

"What were you at Tyrell for?" he said.

"Go away," she replied.

"You must've been there for something."

"I'm not hearing you," she said, voice low. She lay down on the bunk, back turned to him. She closed her eyes. "You're not here."

Gaff waited a few minutes.

"They've interrogated me," she said softly. "Many times. I don't know how long I've been here, and I've lost count of how many times they've asked me that question in every single goddamn session. 'What were you at Tyrell for.' You've probably read the transcript; you know what I'll say to that." A pause. "Zero."

"Didn't read it," Gaff replied. "Didn't bother. I wanted to ask you myself."

Ripley opened her eyes. She lay there like that for a moment, looking at nothing.

Finally, she sat up. "Why'd I go in. Why was I caught. Why were we on Earth. Why did we mutiny. That's what you're asking?" She shook her head. "You know the answers to that. You know all about me. I'll bet they've got lots of files on me, and you've read them all. Maybe you've even seen the files about my programming, which is what I got stuck here for in the first place." She looked at him; the deep brown eyes were hard, bitter. "But I'm here because of one thing nobody ever programmed into me: I loved them. I would have died for them."

Gaff was nonplused at the sudden, raw emotion.

Her mouth quirked again. "Why let out with that? Because I can say anything to you, and what would it matter -- because you're not real." She paused. "Maybe Soledad and Batty and Jones and the others were never real, either. Maybe I imagined even them."

15.

Soledad did not see Lucinda Parmalee the next morning as he joined the queues for the duty trucks, nor was she on his shift at irrigation-laying, Hill #85. It was a double shift, and didn't return until 2100. Soledad stuck it out. Back at the camp, after a sonic shower (it had really rained that day, warm and drizzly) he went to the Mess.

And, yes, Parmalee sat there, all alone except for a man in crew's whites mopping the floor at the far end. The place smelt sharply of cleaning chemicals.

Parmalee was sitting at a long table, tapping a spoon around slowly in a coffeemug. She looked up from her ersatz, saw Soledad approaching. A cold, brittle expression crossed her face. She stared back down at the steel spoon in her hand.

Soledad halted next to the table. "I've been looking for you," he said quietly.

She slanted him another cold look. "Go away."

He studied her. Her short red-gold hair was ruffled; her eyes had a hollow look.

He sat down on the bench opposite her. "I want to talk to you."

The spoon clinked around in the plastoceramic mug. "You had your chance. You mongrel. Since you're unsocialized or something, I'll just say there are lots of words for guys who do what you did, and leave it at that." Parmalee's tone was neutral, nothingness; it might have been coming from nowhere at all. She stirred the spoon about in the cup mechanically. "Do your socialization experiments on somebody else."

Soledad reached over and pulled the spoon from her fingers, laid it down on the formica tabletop. "Please," he said firmly.

She looked at him. A moment's hesitation, then "Come on," and she stood and headed for the door.

He got up and followed her.

The greeneries in front of the Mess/Rec were bathed in bright sodium lights, and the irrigation plugs made *flish-flish* noises under broad-leaved plantings. An artificial breeze soughed through the sapling pines, gently rattled the birches. The Mess/Rec door whacked shut behind Soledad, and Parmalee faced him. In an intense low voice she said, "I just don't understand you, man. I don't know what you want. I'm really not a mind-reader, you know." She looked around; there was no one else in the bright atrium. Still, her voice went lower. "Sometimes you're like some cipher, and it's like pulling teeth to get anything out of you, and you make me feel like it's my own goddamn fault."

It occurred to him again how vulnerable she looked, with that short-cropped hair. The plaid shawl gathered over her shoulders looked incongruous, somehow, over her Midland-issue denimine jacket.

"I'm sorry." He hesitated, searching for the words. "I'm -- I apologize. I was stupid."

Some of the brittleness went from Parmalee's face. She looked uncertainly at him. "Well." She paused. "I was pretty stupid to bring up a thing like birth controls at a moment like that."

"Don't be sorry about it," he said. "You were right, to be angry."

"It really was an idiotic thing to say then, I always blurt out the wrong things at the wrong time," she said earnestly. "I get all carried away and flakey sometimes. And -- and, look, if I made you upset by poking around about your -- " She hesitated. "Well, New York and your personal thing from that. I was surprised, that's all." She touched his arm. "And I was feeling kind of hurt for you."

Soledad wanted to kiss her violently. Instead, he reached out and put a hand to her shoulder, and she relaxed and smiled at him.

"We forgive us," she said.

He puzzled for a moment over her odd phrase. Then he gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I want to tell you something. I have to."

She eyed him. "What?"

"I've never told anyone else this," Soledad said, careful, hesitant. "I want you to hear it. I'm not from New York City, I did not escape from there. I am a replicant."

Parmalee stared at him. Puzzled.

"I'm a replicant," he repeated softly. "I escaped with a group of others from an Offworld colony, and I'm on the run from Los Angeles police. My companions may be dead; I don't know." He paused. "That is the truth."

A look flooded into her face, froze it, a look of bewilderment and fright. He tightened his grip on her shoulder. "Don't look like that," he said.

Parmalee thrust his hand aside. "What the hell else do you want me to look like." She stared at him. Stared. And after a moment of stony silence, it was obvious -- she could think of nothing to say.

Abruptly, she pushed past him.

And rushed away, out of the greeneries, down some side-corridor. Thwack! a door swung shut.

*... when I was with you, I saw the empty place,* Walkerman had said.

It must have been true, Soledad thought, because he felt completely empty now.

That night was a terrible one.

Soledad pulled the small cache of Supplies items from a storage shelf in his quarters. Carefully, methodically, he stuffed them into the backpack he'd readied; then he made a last check of his bedroll, admiring how compact and light it was.

Perhaps there was another station down the train-line. He would have to ask around, perhaps other people at Trurow could give him some data. It would take a day or two to find out reliably enough. You didn't just walk out into the backlands on an alien planet and expect to stumble across another pocket of people. You also didn't just hop a train and expect it to end up in Los Angeles. That made sense.

Abruptly, in the middle of his task, he was hit with a powerful blow of pain. He had never felt anything like it. He doubled over and pitched to his knees, gasping. *This is it. This is The Death.*

His sight suddenly left him.

The shock filled him, gripped him. The shock had a face and a huge, huge mouth and a soundless Voice: *Be one of us. Join your knowledge with our. Be part of us. Be with us.*

Later, it was night and he was walking down the backlands trunk road, exhausted and thoughtful.

He had managed to disengage only after awhile. He'd come back to himself shakily, dizzily. He'd thought himself on the edge of death.

*Damn you, Walkerman.*

After a short walk through a field he came to Hill #29. There was an irrigation canal that snaked past the hill. Soledad crouched on the concrue edge of the stream. It flowed sluggishly, clogged with eager new moss, surface dark under an overcast sky.

Soledad reached into his jacket, brought out the small pile of Leon's photos. They were held together by a metal clip; Soledad loosened it, ran his fingers over the slick surface of the top photo.

The blade runner had said that these things had betrayed his friends, had gotten them killed.

What was it Batty had said at Dominguez, forever ago? "*In this battle there is no giving up. There is only fighting or the death they plan for us. We fight to win, because losing means the knife that Catalan met. LOSing means The Death.*"

He peered at one photo, the one taken at the place Zhora had gotten on Van Eyck Street. The mirror at the far end, through the door. The rare sunlight shining mellowly in the window at the side. The newspapers in Japanese. Roy Batty. You could not see the face; it was blurred with light.

Soledad listened to the noises of the night insects in the fields. Abruptly, he believed it -- he believed that his lost companions were dead. It was a solid truth. It had to be -- inside, in the Voice, he felt hollow and empty. Empty, the way he'd felt when Catalan and then Emma had gone. Could he have felt so aimless or so numbed if any of the others were really alive?

"I had to go away and come here," he said to the photos in his hands. "And soon I'll have to move on somewhere else. If I just sit here and hang on, it'll be the Death. I have to go on."

Slowly, he ripped up the photos one by one, and let the pieces drop into the conduit, where the stream pulled them away and gone.

He lowered his head. "Oh, Roy," he muttered.

\* \* \*

When duty started the next day in the hour around dawn, it was like something unreal. It was like some nervous and slow-moving memory-thing, like a fragment out of the Voice that was haunting and nerve-wracking but, somehow, emptied and bone-stripped of feeling. A vid-show where you knew everything beforehand, but you were only in the audience and couldn't stop the events from rolling past. So Soledad felt, sitting with a dozen others in the back of the duty-truck as it rattled down the backlands dirt road.

It did not seem connected to time.

Perhaps it was all subjective panic, Soledad reasoned. Perhaps it was a symptom that had started that morning before dawn, when the day's duty roster had gone up outside Commons under the timeface; he'd been on the list for terracing at SD, as was Walkerman (*Shepherd*). And Lucinda Parmalee. It was some evil magic or some coincidence brought about by the Voice, Soledad decided, that the last chore he intended to serve at this station be shared with them.

Soledad glanced across at Parmalee, who rode along still and straight, a denimine cap framing her pale face; she was averting her eyes and pretending to make conversation with Alice Falbo.

And he looked unwillingly at Walkerman at the other end of the truck:

*Be with us,*

the other replicant seemed to be suggesting in the grip of the Voice,

(and he did look incredibly like Catalan)

*... come with me, you don't belong here, you belong with us and our kind, together forever and ever, all and null. ALL & NULL. Remember how it was before the Voice came to you, before the incept . . .*

. . . and Soledad wrenched away from that link, and saw Walkerman smile gently. Soledad averted his face.

The truck lurched. And then, unreasonably, it went charging along even faster. "Jesus," one of the workers said. "Asshole driver," a young man muttered, and "Hey, slow it down," from Falbo. Lucinda Parmalee suddenly gave Soledad a startled glance —

— and there was a swerve on the gravel, and someone wailed —

— and impact.

The next thing Soledad knew, he was lying in the sparse yellow grass by the roadside with a feeling of having been knocked hard in the chest.

He scrambled to his feet. A man shouted from the roadside ditch, "Look out, it's goin' up," and Soledad stared up at the tumbled truck by the road as it burst into flames with a *whump* of rushing heat and a muffled shriek from somewhere. "Oh, God," said a voice. It was Lucinda Parmalee, crouching in the grass, and Soledad had a momentary rush of gladness that she had escaped. There was a cut along her face, bleeding, but at least -- "Oh, God," she said hastily, "Falbo's not here. She might be in there."

"Check around for everybody," a woman snapped, getting to her feet stiffly. "Johnson. Mendez. Harvey?"

Soledad approached the burning truck. There were people scattered around it, some clambering to their feet, some still lying there. He felt the heat of the fire against his face. His dark hair was ruffled by some ghostly wind. He saw Walkerman getting up from the gravel and dust of the road, near the fiery wreck, near enough that his fair hair was blown by the same heat-wind, his face lit by the glaring fluttering light.

He grinned at Soledad. "It'll explode, you know."

*He'd like that*, Soledad realized. He glanced around, saw Parmalee running toward the wreck, shouting something he couldn't make out; she was grabbed by another woman, a large black-haired woman who held her back.

One of the truck-wheels, sticking up in the air, was turning slowly, lazily, crowned with fire.

"It really isn't worth it, you know," Walkerman said, reasonably. "What if Falbo's the one to turn you in one day? Any one of them would, if they knew." He backed up a few steps. "It's going to explode. Let's watch."

Soledad found himself nudged by some certainty; it was not the Voice, but it was like the Voice. Again, it was as though it had all *happened* before and he was only watching. He glanced at Parmalee, who had buried her face in the black-haired woman's shoulder. Oddly, he had a sudden memory of that time on the train when she had gripped his hand and he'd glimpsed her face limned with fiery brightness. And he had another memory, a fleeting ghost of Emma Ripley diving through the murderous curtain of light at Tyrell Corp -- the moment when she'd been lost, gone from him forever.

He looked at Walkerman, his face so like Catalan's, fire-lit and yellow-eyed.

Soledad smiled at him. And simply strode toward the truck.

It was really surprisingly easy. The chassis of the truck, the frame: He reached through the blaze. Grabbed the chassis. Gave it a powerful yank, just enough so it see-sawed off its twisted balance. And indeed Falbo was there, he saw her underneath, and again he reached in and he seized her, and he heard her shriek with pain (*but at least she's alive*) and pulled her through the fire, laid her in the roadside ditch. Several people bounded forward and covered her hastily with jackets and shirts.

Her clothing was smoldering, and her hair; her face was cut and bruised.

Abruptly Soledad was knocked to the ground, and he heard a shriek of "Jesus, cover him!" and he was smothered with clothing. Soledad was startled, but he checked himself from struggling. "He must be goddamn well fried," a man's voice said, gasping. Presently whoever it was let go and pulled away the cloth over Soledad's head, a jacket, and he rolled onto his back. Several people hung over him, looking aghast and anxious. Parmalee was kneeling by him, staring at his face. The wind shifted and acrid smoke went riffling past, and she coughed.

"Not a burn on him," someone said, a young man with wiry red hair hanging down his collar, his dirt-smudged face incredulous.

Soledad sat up. He noticed that his denimine jacket was scorched in wide patches around the arms and shoulders, and smelled charred. Interesting. Well, it had needed cleaning, anyway.

Parmalee was still staring at him. Impulsively, she reached out and touched his face.

"You should be fried by now," the red-haired man insisted, and laughed in a high, hasty way.

The large black-haired woman shook her head. "Some people just got luck, that's all."

Soledad lay back on the ground and gazed up at Parmalee. Her palm was cool along his face. "Johnson," she said, in confusion. He touched her wrist.

A couple of duty-trucks came soon, rumbling from the backlands even before a medical team could; probably because of the column of smoke, Soledad realized, as the fire began to gut the wreck. They were all helped into the passenger-ends of the trucks, and Falbo and some of the other wounded were bundled in on the floors, cushioned with clothing, and they pulled away down the road for the station camp. As they watched, the blazing wreck of the truck exploded, a dull boom in the distance. Swaddled in Midland jackets, Falbo moaned, her dark face scorched and bruised. Parmalee reached down and stroked the woman's head. "Soon," she said.

They were driven to the medical bloc of the station, a couple of small grey-sided buildings, and hustled off the trucks and inside. Several people rushed up to Soledad and hugged him, even several men. "Hey, man, I heard," one of them said.

Soledad was ushered into a small lab where he was given the same familiar body-scans he'd had on entry to Trurow. Once, remembering Dominguez, a place like this lab would have terrified him; now he could gaze around benignly at the steel and glass tubes and med-type things as a thin, nasal-sounding medic made him sit naked on the edge of a padded steel table-thing and swabbed yellow, sharp-smelling stuff on his cuts and scrapes. "Mm-hm," she kept saying. "Mph." She poked around his dressings and his head and asked him questions.

The yellow stuff she had put on his wounds was stiffening, hardening into smooth patches. He studied them with great interest. The medic gave him an odd white back-opened garment, nasally told him to Put This On and then Sit Right There, and stalked out.

Soledad put the garment on. He might be sitting here for a long time, and perhaps the medic was morbidly modest.

Finally Doctor Guthry came in with a sheaf of spec-looking things and papers that Soledad guessed were readouts of some kind. Guthry sat down on a stool in front of him, studying the papers. Behind the beard and the scruffy, peppery hair and the glasses, Guthry's dark, seamed face was expressionless. Soledad waited.

"You showed a very high adrenalin and endorphin count," Guthry said absently, leafing through the papers. "That's usual for you, though, and normal for an accident situation." He glanced up at Soledad. His deep voice took on an edge of irony. "And that also accounts for your little stunt, to put it politely. Nothing broken, no concussion, no sprains, nothing jammed, very few cuts or abrasions, not even your basic whiplash. And on top of that no burns whatsoever. Not a single one. From what I've seen of some of the others who went through this, you must just have rubber bones and asbestos skin, hmm?"

Soledad shrugged.

"Look here, Johnson," Guthry said, "the door's shut, we are alone for now, so we have a little time to talk. But only a little." He paused. "You are a replicant, of course."

Soledad looked directly at the doctor. Guthry knew beyond doubt, he had absolute proof; it would have been ridiculous to even bother replying.

"I used to work at Tyrell Corporation, you see," Guthry said.

Soledad reached out and gripped Guthry's arm. "You are one of the ones who made us."

"Yes."

Soledad felt a flood of hope and blind anger. He stood slowly, pulling Guthry to his feet with him, staring at the doctor for a long moment of sudden hatred. "Why shouldn't I kill you?"

"You have the right, I suppose," Guthry said calmly. "Are you planning to strangle me?"

"I should break your neck right now."

Guthry smiled.

They stared at each other.

Finally, Soledad released the doctor's arm. He turned away, seeking a distraction. His throat felt thick with a muddle of confused and contradictory emotions. His clothes hung from a hook beside the lab door; he pulled them down, began pulling his denimines on.

"I suspect that you are not naturally trained for killing," Guthry said. "I suspect you are, in fact, inclined towards careful, balanced planning. You prefer not to be rushed. If forced into an irrational situation, you are uncomfortable. Yes?"

Soledad shot the doctor an impatient look.

"Yes. Correct." Guthry paused, scanning Soledad with keen curiosity. "Speaking of irrational situations: why did you rescue that woman?"

Soledad turned away. He shucked the lab garment and pulled his workshirt on.

"You must have known it would reveal you to someone," Guthry reasoned.

Soledad buttoned up his shirt, face expressionless.

"It is simply a matter of curiosity for me, you see," the doctor added.

Soledad turned back to face the doctor.

"Curiosity," the replicant said. "I have a proposition, for the sake of your curiosity. I propose a game. The condition of it is that you and I will both play it as equals."

Guthry eyed him.

"The game is this," Soledad continued. "I ask a question, and you answer it; and then you get to ask a question, and I will answer. We take turns, as reasonable beings. Yes?"

Guthry gave a bearded, sardonic smile. "Yes."

Soledad sat back down on the steel table opposite the doctor. A tough challenge, accepted easily. Guthry's sense of curiosity must be working at high gear. Why?

"Your turn first," Soledad said.

Guthry studied the replicant, a lively, almost whimsical gleam in his black eyes. "Why did you save Alice Falbo?"

Out of all the things he could have asked first, this was what intrigued the doctor most? "You have a lot of theories, of course," Soledad said.

Guthry considered. "It's problematical. You risked revealing what you are; it's against your nature to make a potentially fatal risk like that."

Soledad smiled. He was starting to enjoy this. "But I did it."

Guthry straightened his heavy-rimmed glasses. "Sometimes isolation has been known to make replicants commit irrational and even self-destructive acts. However, you are not isolated. There is another of you here -- Shepherd, as he calls himself. I assume that enough time has passed that you are aware of this."

"Yes."

"Therefore," Guthry resumed, warming to his hypothesis, "I suggest that it was because he was present, and due to some mutual agreement or conflict, that you --" The doctor paused to smile, " -- screwed up so dramatically. Correct?"

Interesting. Soledad hadn't really thought about sorting out his own motivation. All he knew was that Walkerman had been there and Parmalee had been there, and he'd pulled a person from a sheet of fire. Had it been sheer perversity? Or a quixotic offering with no fixed aim?

He decided to reply simply; one explanation would do as well as any other, but the doctor had a desire for clarity and order. "Correct."

"Ah. You hesitate." Guthry settled back on his stool, pleased and inspired. "I suggest it was due to mutual conflict, then. Was this a conflict concerning, say, involvement with humans? Outside groups, adversaries?"

Soledad grinned again. "Only one question at a time. It's my turn."

Guthry did not seem disappointed. "Hmm. What sort of question would you ask first."

Soledad studied the bearded doctor with glittering dark eyes. His initial surge of anger and need had drained away. He felt happy now; he felt great clarity and purpose now.

"The disease that takes our lives away," he said. "A doctor I once knew called the disease a flaw, a thing that couldn't be helped. Was she lying? Was The Death put in us deliberately?"

"Yes," Guthry replied.

An odd thing to hear confirmed, after all this time. It was a victory over The Tester, in a way; and it was a truth Ripley had died trying to find. Yet it left Soledad feeling numb and unsurprised.

"It has a number and a name and a law. *Circadian deregulation* as per Nexus Statute 112A, the Lakota Strain," Guthry said. "It played a part in my resignation from Tyrell, in fact."

Soledad eyed him measuringly. Resignation?

"Surely you don't think I'd be out here in the armpit of the whole Federated States if I were still designing programmes for them," Guthry said sourly.

Soledad wanted to get around to prying loose more about that nugget of information. "Your question," he said, impatient.

"What is your name, the one you used to function under?"

Soledad shook his head. "I can't answer that. It would give you the advantage."

"True."

"Another question."

"All right. Did you escape from Offworld, or were you seeded here by Tyrell Corporation or Con-Am?"

Soledad smiled again, suspecting a trick. Naturally he itched to blurt out, *What, Tyrell sends some of our kind out here, too?* Thus Guthry would gain the edge on another query of his own.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Guthry said impatiently. "I'm not going to turn you over to Security."

"Offworld escape," Soledad replied.

"Hmm." Guthry brooded for a moment, rubbing his beard. Then: "I know what you'll be wanting to ask next, of course: Why did I resign from Tyrell?"

Soledad cocked an eyebrow. "I'll think up my own questions, thanks." That had of course been exactly the query he'd had ready, but he was hardly going to allow the doctor to be smug about it. "The disease," Soledad resumed. "Is there a way to reverse it, to give us the life-span of normal humans?"

Guthry studied the replicant for a moment, suddenly hesitant. "I truly don't know."

"But you made us."

Guthry laughed -- ironic, abrupt. "Johnson, I have never even seen a replicant. Not to be aware of, at least."

Soledad gave him a cold, unbelieving smile.

"I used to be a designer of programmes at Tyrell, you see," Guthry said. "One of the first ones, in fact, one of the heads of the field. But my job was exclusively design and execution of programme batches. Not hands-on genetic engineering."

"Explain," Soledad said brusquely.

"By programme, I mean the mind, the thought process and enabling knowledge. I didn't design your bodies, nor the flaws that went into them."

"Then how do you know what I am?"

"Your system is so sophisticated that it makes differentiation almost impossible unless one knows what to look for -- and unless one is virtually looking for it."

I know what to look for, at least in theory. And I've been here two years now, with plenty of time on my hands and not much to do *but* look for one of you to come along." Guthry smiled at Soledad. "This is the situation all programmers secretly dread and hope for, you know -- running into our programmes in action."

Soledad looked searchingly at the doctor. His throat felt tight again; there was a flood of questions he wanted to blurt out, perhaps none of which should be answered. A feeling of unreality gripped him. It was some perverse quirk that he would be the one to finally be in this situation, out of all his group. He had always been the inarticulate, uncertain one. Roy Batty would have been the right one to handle this. Batty would have been the eloquent one; Batty would have kept his head.

"Did you give me my programme?" Soledad said softly.

"Maybe. Perhaps. Bits and pieces." Urgently, almost wistfully -- "But it isn't like programming a machine, a computer, you know. It's the combination of things, the harmony of impressions, that makes the mind work; a clockwork of the unpalpable and the abstract at times."

Soledad thought of the Voice. He nodded.

"You understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes."

The doctor leaned back. His expression grew cautious. "I have a question to ask you, and I want you to consider it carefully: Do you and your fellows share any sort of telepathy? Thought-sharing?"

Soledad stared at him. "You mean . . . you don't know about it? You didn't design it that way?"

Guthry leaned his broad forehead against one hand, shut his eyes tightly. "Oh, Christ."

*We used to imagine such things about them. Soledad watched the doctor, bewildered. We used to build up such elaborate stories and theories about the Voice and where it came from, and who controlled it.*

Guthry looked back up at him wearily, sardonically. "I told them. I told them. Well, the idiots buried themselves, I suppose." The doctor removed his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose, then replaced them. "It was not a deliberately designed thing, you see. I was one of the programmers who eventually postulated that it could happen, however, because of the very nature of the higher replicant programmes -- fragmented, shared out. However, among Management it was not a well-accepted hypothesis." He gave a rough chuckle. "Sadasivam Gupta -- Genetics -- suggested something about the sentience of the Nexus line to one of the Earthside tabloids. I hear he's driving Metrokab in Delhi now."

There was a knock at the door. "Doctor Guthry?" said the nasal voice of the medic. "Number three in 156."

Guthry grimaced. "Goddamn it." He turned back to Soledad. "My hypothesis became theory, at least to myself and several others, and the more advanced and complicated the Nexus line became the more sure I was of it," he recommenced more rapidly. "Meanwhile, commercial demand for the Nexus line was heading more and more into the destructive avenues. Warfare. Infiltration. Political assassination. How could I tolerate development of programmes like those? How could I tolerate the early-termination statute, or the uses to which the Nexus replicants were being put? Idiotic, shortsighted!" He snorted. "I left the Corporation. In protest. Hah! -- a lot of good that did."

"And you came out here," Soledad said. "But what about the other people who agreed with your theory?"

Guthry grinned sourly. "Oh, they agreed with me, but they didn't give a damn. Inter-unit telepathy was a solid theory, but suffering and potential disaster were abstract concepts. After all, commerce is their goal at Tyrell Corporation." He sighed, and plowed a few fingers through his beard. "I keep in touch, at any rate, with my former colleagues back at Tyrell via the computer mail. I get terrible news, cataclysmic news: Eldon Tyrell murdered, an official shutdown of generation of the Nexus line."

Another series of knocks at the door. The nasal voice: "Doctor?"

"Yes, yes, dammit," Guthry snapped at the door. He got to his feet. "Change out of that char-broiled clothing, Johnson," he said, sardonic as before, looking keenly at the replicant. "You get today, Friday and the weekend off from duty along with the others who were in the accident. Alice Falbo, by the way, will be off her duty for six weeks, and she might even have to be discharged. But at least she's alive." He strode for the door. "I want to talk to you again tomorrow."

"Guthry," Soledad said. "One more question."

The doctor paused at the door. "Isn't that enough for now?"

"One more." Soledad paused. "You said you don't know about whether the disease can be reversed. Can you help me find out?"

Guthry stuck an index finger at Soledad, admonishing. "Tomorrow."

And then he was out the door, shutting it behind him.

16.

That evening, Soledad went to Mess/Rec casually enough. Maybe he would eat something; maybe he would even see Lucinda Parmalee and have a quiet talk with her.

The place was crowded and noisy. Everyone seemed to want to touch Soledad, to talk to him, and he was deluged with approval. People who hadn't been in the truck accident wanted to know about it in great detail, and people who had been there wanted to tell -- again, in great detail -- all about Soledad's part in it. After a half-hour of friendly mass-interrogation that Soledad managed to bypass easily enough, people's curiosity scattered; they began to wander off to various other tables, laughing together and eating and telling jokes.

Soledad found himself watching them with a pleasant fascination. *I like being with them*, he realized -- the way one would lean back in a chair, the expressions that would dart over another's face, the beautiful sound of laughter.

A wide-eyed young girl was sitting near Soledad, staring at him in shy fascination; suddenly she began informing him that her name was Maria Friedwald, she had come here with her mom, she was fifteen but almost sixteen, and she had been apprenticing in Food Services but next week was going to be moved up to Accounting. At the next table, Roman Torcatti launched onto a tale of the violent Singapore-based exploits of Joe Babaloo; the tale had vaulted Babaloo into a dockside confrontation with thirty-eight Soviet agents as young Maria went back to gazing worshipfully at Soledad, and just as Babaloo was whipping out his antique customized Uzi a man sat down next to Soledad. It was Walkerman.

"Hello," Walkerman said.

Soledad leaned back in his chair. "Maybe you'd better go find your mother," he said to the girl. She looked crestfallen for a moment, then accepted with a shrug, and trailed away reluctantly into the cheering group around Torcatti's table.

Soledad studied his fellow replicant. Carefully, he reached into the Voice and clenched his own awareness against intrusion. Walkerman's yellow-brown eyes glittered with urgency and irritation. "That escapade by the truck," he said, low-voiced. "You could have given us both away. What did you mean by that?"

Soledad gazed at him. Momentarily he was flooded with a sudden, urgent feeling of kinship. Everything seemed changed by his confrontation with Guthry; he felt full of dawning hope and a sort of cautious wonder -- *Could Guthry help me? Could we live?* He considered telling Walkerman about Guthry's knowledge of them. How could he phrase it? *There's hope, Walkerman, and you can forget your ideas about the nobility of The Death. What if you could live a normal length of time, would that change your way of invasion and bloodsucking?*

He hesitated, on the verge of telling the other replicant. But Walkerman was looking at him with repulsion. "Who would ever think it, that you once ran with the ones of our kind that you did? A combat leader of Roy Batty's sort," he hissed, "you're not even in his class."

Soledad looked at him. "You think you can use him as a weapon against me, to shame me? You didn't even know him."

"I know him through you, better than you do; I'm a commando leader and I've led our kind through war and survival."

"You still can't let go of *before*, can you." Soledad shook his head. "Batty was our leader and brother. But he is dead and I am alive -- something even he would envy."

Walkerman's eyes glinted. "You two-faced reject."

"You are the one who's not in his class," Soledad said softly. "Life and death were the only stakes he was interested in, for himself or any of us equally. That was the real claim we all had on one another, that was the real Voice we had." Soledad looked with contempt at the other replicant. "You should know that. Commando leader."

"I should kill you," Walkerman whispered. "You are a traitor to the ways and to our kind. You are completely ignorant and insanely selfish. You should give yourself over to us; I should take you right now, take you in the ways and blast your brains out your ears."

Soledad smiled. "Brotherly love. You're a wonderful example of it."

Walkerman's eyes glinted with anger; shut against any Voice-bond, Soledad could only guess at what might be going through his powerful brother-replicant's mind. A plan for destruction? For violence? A near-decision to surrender, to return to his collection, wherever it might be?

Walkerman was clearly on the brink of saying something. Of doing something.

Soledad looked up. Lucinda Parmalee was approaching his table through the crowded room. Her eyes met Soledad's, and his throat tightened with a sudden flood of gladness and warmth.

Walkerman looked away irritably, impatient at the interruption.

She sat down in a chair opposite Soledad, silent. Her blue-green eyes were full of urgency and uncertainty. Soledad noticed that the cut on her face seemed half-healed already. Perhaps the medics had put some of that yellow stuff on it.

"Were you hurt?" he said.

She smiled slightly. "Want to see how the weather is outside?"

Soledad nodded. He got up from the table and gave Walkerman a big smile. "May I, please?"

Walkerman gave him a quick, slitted look. Silent.

Soledad and Parmalee threaded their way through the crowd and out of the Mess/Rec. They passed through the arboreum, saying nothing, and went down Hall 20 to the exit airlock.

Outside, the twilight sky was choked with heavy clouds. There was a vague smell of wet iron in the air -- heavy rain on the way. The ripe humidity smelled intensely beautiful to Soledad, so beautiful that he had to suppress a shudder. The last glimmer of sunlight had a sullen tinge to it that gave him a fierce, unplaceable longing.

They walked through the Commons yard in silence; in silence, they started aimlessly down Trunk Road 12.

*I might live. There might be a way to live. The thought tugged at him feverishly, dizzily: I might not have to worry about where day after tomorrow is coming from; it might be mine.*

He wished he could tell Parmalee all this. Without words. Words were a clumsy, uncomfortable invention at best. He wished he could communicate it to her by touching her shoulder, say, or by caressing her short red-gold hair. If she'd been of his kind, he could have.

His sense of longing redoubled.

Finally, looking at her as she walked beside him, he confined himself to: "Were you hurt in the accident?"

Parmalee glanced at him. She shrugged. "I got thrown from the truck. Nothing bad. I sort of saw it coming, and I managed to get a good enough jump out. A few bumps, a sore arm . . . the meds fixed it up okay." She laughed curtly. "The wonders of technology. As the saying goes, they tightened a few screws and it's as good as new."

A pause. They walked on.

Presently Soledad glanced at her again; she was studying him with a curious, inscrutable expression. "Why did you tell me about yourself?" she said.

He sensed that she wanted bluntness in return. He looked away from her, glanced at the now night-darkened field by the road. "Because. I wanted you."

She was silent.

"You are afraid of me," he said.

"Oh, Johnson," she said sadly.

"That is a name from stolen plastic -- my true name is Soledad. Willy Soledad."

Parmalee smiled uncertainly, peering up at him through the dark. "I never saw a replicant before. I don't really know if I'm afraid or not." She stuck her hands into her jacket pockets, kicked a stone a-tumble down the road. "I've been a plug-in. I've been a plasticker, an ID forger in the inner sector. I forged for druggies, Tong Mafia Dread soldiers, middle-income 10th-floor hubbies who wanted to disappear from the wifey, intelligentsia in trouble with the gov, and everything in between. After a while of fixing plastic you get to know who the real fakes are, the real unpeople."

They were in the area of the hills now, the hills with the irrigation canals threading among them. A winged creature flitted by, dipping low over a canal, twittering. The air was heavy-feeling, humid. There were several low, faraway rumbles -- from the hills, it seemed. Thunder.

Parmalee added, low-voiced, "They always say, Well, why haven't you gone Offworld? I tried once, back when I was on the street. I flunked all the emigration med-exams there were. And then when I'd been a Madisonite after a while, I wasn't interested any more, even though I could have passed the meds by then. I hated the colonies and everything they stood for. I still do."

Soledad watched her. She looked terribly young, terribly open and raw and vulnerable. It might be because of the way she was looking at him now, though. "You know what my idea of Offworld was?" she said. "You've seen those people in the ads, in the mags and billboards and zeps?"

Soledad nodded.

"You look at those people and you think, I wish I could look like that. I wish I could be like that. Those people look like superpeople, like they've got ahold of everything. And you look at them and you try to be like that, but you're always disappointed. And you end up treating the people in the ads as though they were real, by wanting to be like them and hating them when you can't be."

Soledad thought of the photos, Leon's photos of the unknown humans. "Yes," he said softly.

Parmalee glanced up at Soledad and her smile grew warm and ironic. "You know why I liked you? Because you seemed so different."

"You mean you thought I was one of those perfect superpeople in the ads and vids?" he said wryly.

She shook her head. "No. That's what you seemed so different from."

Soledad halted. On impulse, he reached out and touched her face. He drew her close and kissed her lightly, slightly, a touch of his lips to hers.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "When I saw you going toward that fire," she whispered, "I thought you must be crazy. I thought, 'Oh, his poor face will get burnt off.' I thought -- " She halted. "Soledad. Don't leave me alone again."

Soledad took her face between his hands. Her openness still fascinated and pained him. He could read things in her expression -- blue-green eyes wide with longing, mouth tight with uncertainty.

"I lied to you, but at the same time almost everything I told you was the truth," he said. "The colony I escaped from . . . the people of my kind that I left in Los Angeles. I just tried to make it an easier truth for you to understand."

She smiled bitterly. "The truth didn't go down easy. I guess I'm not the anarchist I thought I was. I guess I prefer the good lie to the truth, just like everybody else."

It was beginning to drizzle as they stood in the middle of the dirt road. Rain droplets spotted her hair with wet, beading up on the water-resistant denimine of her jacket. The tiny droplets of rain misted her face, her neck and fair hair.

"There is a thing that my people have in common." Soledad caressed her cheek, searching for the words. "It is a thing that calls us together and keeps us together. It's the one thing that never lies. We . . . feel part of one another. I saw that thing in you, somehow. I still see it." He hesitated. "I see it as though I know you."

Parmalee stared up at him, raindrops streaming down her upturned face.

She slipped her arms around his neck and pressed her mouth to his.

The rain began falling in sheets. They ran down the road through the downpour, to shelter in the hollow under the terrace-work shoring by Hill #152 nearby, the overhang from which Soledad had once watched clouds and canal go by. Under the broken slabs of concrete it was warm and dry and the young moss had grown thick. They huddled close together, caressing each other's wet skin and hair, kissing in broken snatches as they stripped off each other's rain-damp clothing -- off the shoulders, down the hips.

They coupled, rocking slowly. They could hear the irrigation stream rushing past, droplets of rain beating a tattoo on the ground outside their shelter.

Soledad did not grope for the Voice this time. His blindness was his gift to her. He pressed his face against her neck, eyes shut. *My gift to you.*

There was a smell of warm damp soil, crushed new moss. Parmalee whispered things to him, odd broken tender things, and Soledad arched hard in response and she moaned, twisting.

"Lucinda," Soledad said. He stroked her flushed face. He wanted to tell her something. Something urgent. He did not know any words for it. She reached up for him, curling a hand against his neck. Soledad kissed her.

They were locked together, fierce, hard. Straining, gripping, sweat-slicked. The rain grew heavier outside the overhang, a steady downpour, and there was the sharp iron smell of wet soil. Parmalee bucked against Soledad and cried out softly. He sucked in breath at a sudden, stark spasm. She tossed her head back, biting her lip. Straining. Gripping.

17.

It was the usual inspection visit, at the customary time.

As per routine Gaff was led by the usual guard through the downed energy gate to the small warren of cells off Lab 2-A, and ushered into the familiar tiny, aseptically white cell. As per routine the energy gate went back up behind him, a deadly sheet of roiling light and dust-motes. Gaff sat down in the usual chair, took off his hat, loosened his Guapo coat. Emma Ripley lay there on the cot by the latrine unit, as always. Her back was to the room. Her eyes were closed, in sleep or in some private cocoon of memory.

The regular three or four minutes of silence ensued. Gaff waited.

After a certain number of sessions here, Gaff had come to a decision: the replicant female Ripley had his respect. She was a tough one, a smart one, and a scabbler. She would make an ace-caliber Family soldier. The time had come, though, to put all these sessions to use for just that purpose. Uncle Kimura had indicated so.

Finally, right on schedule, Ripley rolled over and looked up at him. The usual look of cool irony had washed over her face. "The Spanish Inquisition," she said.

"The machine revs up. Ready to roll."

"Fuck you."

"Can't wait, liebchen."

Her mouth quirked. She sat up on her bunk, ran a hand through her mane of dark brown hair. "So when are you finally going to get rid of me?"

Gaff allowed himself to smile. This was gratifying. She had edged onto the subject herself. Maybe she too had decided the time had come for some action. "Get rid of you?" he said.

"You're police. It's your thing. I run, you shoot."

"You think you're gonna run from here, huh? You got escape plans?" He paused, still smiling at her. "I'm not really police."

Her cool gaze narrowed. She eyed the ID band clipped to his coat lapel. "Then what's that?"

"I'm police, but not in here. Not while we're talking."

"What are you talking about."

"My thing right now is to spring you."

She gave a smile. "Spring me and I'll run. And you'll shoot."

"You mentioned a guy named Soledad. One of your skinjob friends, am I right?"

Ripley stared at Gaff. "That's none of your business."

"I'm right. One of your skinjob friends. A real close friend, I think." Gaff leaned back in his chair. "I found Soledad. I let him go. Maybe you wanna find him some day."

Silence.

"I'm here to spring you because I got a job for you. The job is on the outside."

Ripley examined Gaff with chilly mockery. "Work for you?"

"Not for me, for us. And the job would have a perk that might interest you." He paused for effect. "My employer likes to collect organic animals. He just recently obtained a cat from Tyrell Corporation, a cat with a real interesting history. A cat with the name of Jones."

"You bastard," she whispered.

Gaff smiled. It had been bizarre to see the sandy-yellow tom roaming the hallways of Uncle Kimura's 300th-floor demesne at Kalarchian Towers, no doubt hunting for mice or whatever had passed for mice aboard the *Nostromo*. Gaff decided not to elaborate on that. He preferred not to see desperation in her, especially not over her weak point, a damn cat; he preferred a tough barter.

"And I know where Roy Batty is," he resumed pleasantly.

Her gaze narrowed. "You said he's dead. They said he's dead."

Gaff shrugged. (Not really a lie — merely a hint at a larger truth that would soon come to be.)

"You bastards," she said flatly. "What are you doing to him?"

"Me? Us? Nothing. Tyrell Corporation, on the other hand -- "

"Do they have Soledad too?" she snapped.

"No. I told you, I let him go."

She paused. Her rich, deep brown eyes glittered, watching his face. "Who's this employer of yours, this 'us'?"

"The Family. We run another kind of corporation. The colonies belong to Tyrell and Con-Am and Weylan/Yutani and the rest; this city belongs to us families. Be our soldier, fight in our wars in the barrios. You keep with us and show face, that means you'll be safe from the cops and you'll have us; you run, and the cops will get you — if we don't first."

"Sounds attractive."

"It should," Gaff said in his quiet, raspy, slow way. "You stay here and you'll feel plenty pleased with yourself, and you'll keep what you used to be -- and then they'll either induce death in that way you know pretty good from Dominguez, or your stupid disease will kill you. Or you get out and get a new chance. You get a place. You get to be a person."

She gazed at him, considering. But she could still be defiant: "I should just be down on my knees and kissing your feet, is that it?"

"You should be kissing more than that. Who knows what can happen when you got a brand new chance?"

Ripley studied his face. "Why are you making me this offer? Why do you need me?"

"You're a replicant. You're a survivor. They say you're designed to live through anything, and you've proven it."

She leaned back against the bare white wall by her bunk, drawing her knees up and hugging them. "A survivor." A kind of chilly amusement stirred her fine-boned face. "Back on the *Nostromo*, near the end -- I told you about when we found out the science officer was a robot, right?"

"Yeah."

Her mouth tightened. "He said something when we plugged him back in, and I've never forgotten it. We were asking him about how to kill the alien, how to get it out of the ship. He said we couldn't. He started talking about its structural perfection, how he admired it for its purity. 'A survivor,' he said, 'unclouded by conscience, remorse or delusions of morality.' " Absently, she ran a hand through her wavy dark hair. "Sometimes I think that's what our makers wanted us to be. It was in their design that we be that way, it was in their best interests. Did it work?"

"No," Gaff conceded. A gift of respect.

Ripley's mouth quirked. "It was what Ash wanted to be, though. He admired that monster, he loved it. Actually, since he was a robot, he had an *optimal estimate* of it . . . Yes, I'm a survivor, Gaff, but don't ever make the mistake of making me out a robot." Her gaze returned to the blade runner. "Get me out of here. Goddamn you."

\* \* \*

## 13.

A couple of hours after sunrise, Willy Soledad indulged in a water shower -- rare luxury -- pulled on a clean set of clothes, and hurried across the muddy, sun-dazzled Commons yard, destination Mess/Rec.

Parmalee was waiting at a long table, with two trays of food. When Soledad came into the hall she smiled and waved for his attention, even though it was well into the morning shift and there were only two or three others sitting around. He sat down next to her, at the end of the table. She pushed a tray at him. "I just grabbed some stuff, hope it's okay." She was nibbling at a piece of brown bread.

She'd washed her hair, he saw. It was bright and soft-looking, almost ruddy, and so short and fine that it stood up a little. There was a faded red kerchief knotted around her neck, under the collar of her blue workshirt. She was also wearing Soledad's denimine jacket.

He reached over and touched the collar of the jacket. "It's big on you."

She smiled, stirring her ersatz.

Earlier in the morning, she'd been sneezing after the rain. He'd put the jacket over her shoulders on their way back to the camp proper. On their way back to continue lovemaking in her quarters.

She was wearing the jacket as a gesture, he guessed -- a reminder.

He touched her right hand that rested on the tabletop. A slim, fine-boned hand, that met his with a gentle squeeze. Her gaze wavered, fell again to her mug of ersatz.

He didn't need to be reminded. *My sister...* But no, that was the impossibility and the beauty of it. She was not a sister. He knew her now, in a thorough and powerful way, and she knew him; yet it was unlike the Voice-bond -- more like a marrow-deep yes. She was a part of him, yet separate.

Their bond would be subject to outside forces. It could change and shift and perhaps grow, given time -- because of their differences.

*Time.* Abruptly Soledad realized he was beginning to make plans, to take a future for granted. His mouth quirked. Guthry had said he'd talk to Soledad again today? Yes, he would talk. He would definitely talk.

Soledad looked down at his tray. Parmalee had chosen a lot of vegetable and fruit-type things that he didn't recognize, a hunk of bread, a mug of steaming ersatz, a cup of some lurid orange-tinted liquid. He picked up the bread, and bit into it.

The comfortable silence continued.

Soledad nudged a couple of protein cuboids around on his plate with his fork, chewing on his piece of bread; he glanced up to find Parmalee studying him with an odd, faintly questioning look.

He put down his fork. "What?"

She shrugged, and dropped her gaze again. "Nothing."

"No, really. You want to ask something."

When she looked up again, a whimsical, sheepish look crept across her face. "You'll be angry. Or upset."

"How can I be upset today?" he said logically.

She squeezed his hand again and leaned closer. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I've heard things about -- you guys. Programming, memory, this and that -- one way or another it has to make sense. In a purely practical way. I mean, they taught you to do whatever it is your job was. Right?"

Soledad stared at her. "Mm." Noncommittal. What was she getting at?

"When we were together -- last night -- " She hesitated. "Did they teach you that?"

Abruptly, he laughed.

Parmalee buried her face in one hand. "God. A social gaffe with a replicant," she muttered. "This has to be a first."

Grinning, Soledad leaned back in his chair. "Was that supposed to be a compliment?"

"No. I mean -- well, I guess you -- oh, damn." Parmalee flushed. Soledad had never expected to see the former Madisonite embarrassed about bunking. He leaned over, putting a hand behind her neck to pull her close, and kissed her. The response was warm and full; her mouth tasted bitterly of ersatz.

"No, *they* did not teach me," he told her softly.

She laid a hand lightly on his nearest leg. "There's a joke, it goes to the effect of, 'Why don't replicants rust in the rain?'"

Soledad smiled. "Wet weather last night."

"Yeah. Feel any rust setting in?"

"I'm not sure. Ferrous oxide's a tricky thing."

She squeezed his leg. "Let's go somewhere to check it out." He laughed, and she kissed him. "Can't even get through breakfast. Damn equipment in this station needs servicing day and night, day and night. And it's getting me sore all over."

Soledad gave her a clinical look. "Better have it checked, then," he said. "Tighten a few screws." He slid a hand under the jacket she wore.

She swatted his hand, laughing.

"No? Maybe a realignment?"

"All this crudity in public. Really." She gave him a hurried kiss. "Let's go somewhere," she whispered in his ear.

Soledad smiled at her. "I have to talk to someone."

"Who? About what?"

"Someone who found out about me, he may be able to help me. We're going to talk about the future."

Parmalee settled back in her seat. She studied him. "The future. Something I wouldn't mind talking about."

"I'm not used to it," he said ruefully. "You'll find I'm not very good at it."

They sat for a few moments in silence.

Roman Torcatti came walking past. "Morning," he said.

"It is," Soledad replied. Torcatti laughed, shaking his head, and went out the EXIT door.

Absently, Soledad stirred his ersatz. He and Parmalee resumed studying each other.

"I learned to always believe there's some way to get around a problem," Parmalee said.

"Yes. Often through accident."

"This is not accident I'm talking about." She leaned closer to him. "I want to be with you."

"There isn't an easy way about it, though," Soledad said. "For instance, you're associating with a fugitive replicant. That has to be against your law system in one way or another. If they catch me . . . I think you know the penalties."

She touched his hand atop the table. "And I'm not one of your kind. We'll always be different."

"There are other things." Soledad could not bring himself to tell her about The Death. Other offering: "I can't make you pregnant, give you a baby."

A pause.

"Nothing is ever final, you know," Parmalee said quietly. "Nothing is finished or absolute. That's the way it is in this world. We'll work it all out somehow."

"Work out what?"

They looked up. Walkerman, two seats down from Parmalee, bit into an apple and smiled gently. "I don't like off days," he said. "Too much time on my hands, and besides . . ." He shrugged. "Well, there's no one to talk to." He took another crunch from the apple.

Soledad looked away. *It's all over*, he thought clinically.

"Hey, Shepherd," Parmalee said, irritable. "This is a personal discussion. Please."

"Please what?" Walkerman smiled at her, munching. Then he put the apple down on the bare table in sudden mock disappointment. "Oh. Dear. You weren't furnished with the complete news! Could our mutual friend have been so remiss? Could he have failed to be talkative?" He laughed, a soft, warm sound. "A terrible way to treat relatives."

"Relatives." Parmalee turned back to Soledad and stared at him. "You mean he's -- he's one of you?"

"Walkerman, stop it," Soledad said coldly.

"But I love talking to you," Walkerman said. His eyes glittered happily, emptily yellow. "It gets so lonely out here without a kindred spirit. And now I'm finally finding kindred spirits all over the place, it's a gold mine, a treasure trove."

"How many of you *are* there out here?" Parmalee hissed to Soledad.

"He is not a friendly," Soledad told her. "He is insane. He's --" Soledad felt fleeting pity for Walkerman; The Death had shaped him this way. "He's an accident."

Parmalee looked at the intruder replicant. Walkerman favored her with a grin. Abruptly he moved from his chair to the one beside Parmalee's. "Listen," he said softly -- and he smiled and trailed one hand down Parmalee's nearest shoulder. "You are beautiful," he said.

She pulled away, shuddering. "Piss off."

"I enjoyed it last night," Walkerman said. Gently, intimately. Touching her shoulder again. Parmalee yanked free of him. "He was open, you see," Walkerman continued, "and so were you, he had you wide open. Down on the ground." He closed his eyes. "Lovely. He enjoyed you thoroughly, and I experienced it in my modest way. He is so generous." Walkerman turned to Soledad, and his face was convulsed with a sudden, violent fury. "Too generous. Why he chose to share the ways with one of *them* I will never know."

Soledad stared at him, confused. "What?"

"Traitor," Walkerman whispered. "The ways. The Voice."

"I thought you didn't know him before," Parmalee said. Bewilderment and frustration flashed across her face. "I thought -- "

Soledad sighed. "Walkerman," he said in a reasonable tone, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do," Walkerman whispered. Insisting. "The Voice. You gave it to her." He turned quickly, abruptly, to Parmalee. "He didn't tell you about why he's on the run, did he? He didn't tell you that all replicants of our kind die after a very few years? None of us knows how much time we're given. But we always die, murdered, of the same disease."

Soledad leaned over to Walkerman. "You don't care who hears you, you idiot," he said quietly. "There are other people here. Do you want to be arrested?"

Walkerman ignored him. His yellow-brown gaze was fixed on Parmalee. "You might ask why he's continuing this game of running. He's going to drop dead soon like the rest of us. He'll never be one of you, because of his death sentence. Why bother? He belongs with us."

Parmalee covered her face with her hands. "Get out of here."

Soledad watched Walkerman with an odd feeling of finality. *This has gone on long enough.*

Walkerman was laughing. "Get out of here, get out of here," he mimicked. "Go away, little doggy. That's how you really think of us, isn't it? Even him. Admit it. Organic animals are the most fabulous commodity you people can own. Why, isn't it even more fabulous to own an organic person? He walks, he talks! But then, it's all right, because at the most basic cellular level he's a mongrel." He laughed, leaning back in his chair, relaxed and happy; his face was twisted with glad contempt. "And besides -- "

(and Soledad lowered his face into his hands and tried it, the thing that was forbidden.)

(he reached into the Voice for the kin-Voice, the congruent consciousness, and wrenched.)

#### *INTERCEPT*

(and nothingness, emptiness, a blank.)

Nothingness.

*what do you want from me? -- Soledad, demanding, desperate. -- what do you want out of her? i can't go with you, walker man, because you aren't really my kind. i want to go on, i want to keep on going, and that's the claim batty and emma and zhora and the others had on me, that was the real VOICE we had.*

*i knew you would come to me some time, came the congruency. Not reflecting on what Soledad had attempted to relate; but with triumph and self-engrossed awe. -- you have come to me at last. i've been walker man to many, and this has been the longest road of all.*

*you have no claim. what do you want?*

*fascinating way to put it, brother, the question really being what do WE want?*

Utter puzzlement. Pause. Soledad was vaguely aware that time might be going past or standing still; in the grip of the Voice, what seemed an eternity of conversing might be taking place in a mere moment, a violent second.

*you have been so selfish, friend, the other, vacuous consciousness related. -- all you think about is surviving, surviving. beating the death. living on. if you went with us, you would live on and on and on, with us and through us. through the death. through the ways. you ran with a rogue group and thought you loved them, then you hook up with a stupid human and you call it love. that is nothing. selfishness. don't you see that through the WAYS comes the perfect and complete love. the only selfless love. abandon self and give in and i will join you with all the others, and all that exists will exist through me, all that sees and knows will do it through me, until someone takes my memories and all the ONES that are in it. we will exist in union past the end, we will go back to the root of the VOICE and be memory patterns joined in perfection, passing on and on. all one. that is the only love. all else is resistance to your basic pattern.*

*-- i am myself. Abrupt, sharp protest. I AM MYSELF.*

*you are perverse, soledad. you're only making it harder. after all, we should know what's really best for you.*

Soledad tried with all his will to disengage. Impossible. He was locked in. Locked. Now I know why this is forbidden, came the stray, rueful thought -- the last that was his own, because there was an impulse, a surge, not anything Soledad could separate out

(time was gone)

but an image-mass that hit with almost physical force; he was vaguely aware that he was connected somehow to a body, and that that body had pitched over and the cheekbone had struck something flat and hard

(a floor somewhere?)

and suddenly the rest of the world was blotted out. Out.

A flat horizon. Flatness everywhere, north to south, earth and sky meeting at the horizon-line, and then sea and night-sky and the flat, flat horizon emptying into the flat green dot of light on a screen, the dot sliding, sliding past (that means halted heart, blank pulse) and a sharp low buzz that says zero, ZERO . . .

. . . and sliding off into nothingness.

*you've seen this place, you understand this place, something or someone told him. It/They seemed briefly to wear the face of The Tester, Dr. Lakshmi Tamil; he could almost feel the drugs sliding into his veins, except that he had no arm or body.*

He could almost imagine himself back at Dominguez, with death and madness pressing down on him, and only the Voices of his companions to guide him, and his to guide them . . .

*you've seen this place, you understand this place,* the Other insisted. The Other wanted this memory of his -- *the place before* *incept* In a last effort, Soledad opened up that part of his knowledge -- the All and the Null, the Void, *this place* -- clutched it all to himself and to the Other that was bonded leechlike to him --

and Soledad relayed:

*you want it so badly? take it.*

Abruptly, the grip of the Voice was loosed in a cataclysmic flood: Soledad was returned, and time and place returned to Soledad. A burst of light, a shriek of pure sound.

He lapsed into a quieter darkness.

He woke flat on his back somewhere. On a floor. It must have been in a large room, because the ceiling was vast. It was white. There was an even whiter rectangle of light spread across it from an open door somewhere. It dawned on him that this was the ceiling of Mess/Rec.

"Oh, my God." Parmalee's voice. She was bending over him, kneeling, stroking his face. There was an odd look of fright on her face. "Can you move at all?"

Soledad was pleased just to lie there and study her face, familiar and real. That only worried her more. "Willy?"

"All right," Soledad said, finally. He sat up. The feat astonished him. He smiled at Parmalee.

She stared at him. "Oh, God, man, you had me terrified." She slid her arms around his shoulders. "Are you all right?"

Soledad noticed then that there were six or seven people in medical whites in the room. They weren't paying attention to Soledad; they were clustering over a body on the floor nearby, between the rows of Mess/Rec tables. They were shouting and snapping orders and produced more and more mysterious-looking implements and hardware and applying it all to the body on the floor, doing strange, violent-looking things to it.

The body was Walkerman's. It wasn't moving.

Soledad put his arms around Parmalee, shut his eyes against her hair. "No. No."

She stroked his back. "What?"

"Lucinda," he whispered, "I killed him."

## 14.

It was a little like a procession, Gaff decided; a meeting of generals to discuss terms of surrender or truce in some No Man's Land. Each side bore gifts, concessions; each led a delegation, or was it an odd honor guard?

The almost-empty tenement on Victor Mature Avenue and 12th was the closest thing Gaff had ever seen to a no man's land. It was ideal, down in the deepest pits of Three Sector, on a Family-owned block that was sure-shot safe. Nevertheless, when he showed up there with the packages three minutes early, he had a pair of Uncle Kimura's prime soldiers along, for show and . . . just in case.

They followed routine: first the tall, rail-thin black woman, Cookie, pulled her Lefrak Special as they proceeded down the hall, then went ahead and kicked Apartment 6A's door slam-open. Juke Bordello, blond and swaggery and a little demon-eyed, meanwhile covered the rear staircase. Cookie came back to the door, nodded sharply, and Gaff followed her in. Bordello grinned and stationed himself outside the wide-open door.

Gaff looked around the room. It was very ancient, dun-drab paint peeling from the walls like old bark. The room itself was set up for a short formal conference: small table, two spindle-backed chairs on either side. That was it.

Gaff set a small mobile-freezer unit on the table. He pulled out one chair and sat. Two hours ago he had met in the splendor of Uncle Kimura's top-floor Kalarchian Towers penthouse with the patriarch himself, for final instructions. Gaff had only met face-to-face with Uncle Kimura three times since reaching adulthood, and so it had been a singular experience: Uncle Kimura slouching back in his real cowhide lumpchair, with his ever-massive bush of dreadlock hair, taking deep draws on his carrot-sized spliff while issuing razor-precise instructions to his nephew and soldiers.

The "accessing" of the contents of this freezer from the HQ morgue, as well as its corresponding programme files, had been the result of those instructions.

One thing was for sure -- Gaff's blade runner days were now most surely over. Defunct for a far, far better thing. *O brave new world.*

He glanced at Cookie. The Family soldier stood by one window, casing the street. Her eyes had, as usual, a slantwise look halfway between boredom and contempt. She straightened, tall and elegant and venomous, and shot Gaff a quick glance. "They're here," she sneered.

"Then bring it in," Gaff replied.

The soldier stalked to the open, age-battered door of the apartment and fetched the final prize from the landing -- a rectangular case with air holes and a loop-handle.

"In here," Gaff said.

She carried the case to the table, set it down by the freezer unit. Gaff slid back the view-hatch on top of the case, and Jones the cat blinked up at him through the acrylic screen.

"Ay caramba, Don Gato." Gaff slid the hatch closed again.

There was the drone of the antiquated elevator, and a few seconds later Juke Bordello ushered in Dr. O'Malley Kudadje and a wry-faced, balding, middle-aged, mild-looking type. Plus, of course, the replicant woman, Emma Ripley.

Strange to see the group outside the little world of Tyrell, dressed for the streets. Kudadje was attired in natty business suit and opaque acid-resistant slicker; Ripley had been furnished with cheap but glowing yellow triacetate Tibetan smock and rather fashionable Chinese skinpants. You would have thought her a routine-level prole, from the looks. Her dark hair was pinned back. She returned Gaff's stare with a cool little smile.

"Really, Lieutenant," Kudadje said, shaking his head. "Guns?"

"Don't want you to feel like you're missing out on anything," Gaff said. He stood, leaned on his cane. "Okay, so far, so good. You got her, and I," he gestured at the mobile-freezer unit on the table, "got him." He reached into one coat-pocket, brought out a double-mode tape, plastic-sealed; a knowledge programme marked N6MAA010816. "All of him."

The face of the balding, wry-faced gent lit up.

"I don't think we've been introduced?" Gaff said. Behind the other trio, Juke Bordello leered and nudged Kudadje with his Regelin barrel -- "Yeah, introductions."

Gaff snapped his fingers, and Bordello subsided.

Kudadje smoothed his little beard. "This gentleman with me is Dr. Gustav Nash, one of the planners behind that information programme you have there. We could not complete this arrangement without him."

"He puts it all in their heads, huh?" Gaff smiled at the replicant woman Emma, who was not paying much attention; she was looking around the room, sizing it up -- for danger? For possible exits? "You responsible for her head?" Gaff said.

The guy named Nash quirked an eyebrow, unruffled. "Responsible? That's a strong term. Maybe responsibility by committee."

Gaff shrugged, flipped the tape to him; the half-bald hombre caught it neatly.

Then Gaff sat again, and gestured to the other chair; Kudadje sat. Cookie reached over and nudged the little freezer unit so it sat nice and square in the middle of the table between the two men.

"The arrangement?" Gaff said.

Kudadje nodded, all business. "An even exchange, of course. For cooperating with you in the matter of the rogue Six, we obtain this package; and in exchange for your efforts in obtaining this for us will be both *this* Six," and he gestured briefly toward Emma, under guard by Bordello, "and part of the fruits of this." He tapped the freezer unit.

"And the collateral?" Gaff said.

The scientist smiled. "Mutual silence under the law."

Gaff leaned back in his chair, scrutinizing Kudadje. "I'd say that arrangement is loaded pretty heavily in our favor. You must really want this thing."

"It's a rare chance, Lieutenant," Nash said. His voice was unusually sonorous for such a mild-looking guy. "Production of Sixes may be illegal now, but even when it was booming we were held back."

"You were flooding the market," Gaff countered.

"But don't you see, commercial demand dictated our product." There was a glint of wry humor still in Nash's pebble-brown eyes, but oddly the voice was stern, resonant, like a Savonarolan preacher's. "Can you imagine what we could have made of these creations if we'd been able to design programmes along optimal lines, the more ideal lines we would have preferred? With constructive programming, what couldn't they do for our society? Take this model, for instance." He tapped on the freezer unit shell. "Our best, and yet our greatest failure: it could never be what it might have been." The scientist patted the freezer. "Now it can."

Gaff looked at the scientist, such a shrewd-looking type. He was tempted to wipe that wise look off Nash's face by saying, *How do you know so much about what to put in their heads, then, mister?* But he didn't say it; it was, after all, their business.

He reached out and pushed the mobile-freezer case toward Kudadje. "You going to give it the same name?"

Kudadje stood and gripped the case's handle, hefted the unit neatly. "You can, of course, give the individual we'll provide you with whatever name you wish. However, for the one that we generate from this for *our own uses . . .*" The bioengineer gave an elegant shrug. "Why break tradition? Somehow this one will always be Roy Batty in one form or another."

The replicant Emma glanced around sharply, suspicious, at Kudadje.

*Batty's name*, Gaff realized. She still didn't know quite what was going on. But the name commanded her attention.

The one called Nash gave a short laugh, then added, "Three months and we can deliver it to you. It'll be interesting to see what comes out of having several Batty types running around in the same city."

Gaff glanced briefly at him, with distaste. Then he jerked his thumb, and Cookie stepped forward and guided them out of the room, her Lefrak to the fore; then they were out of the building.

The room was silent.

Gaff sat there for a moment by himself, trying to imagine what it would be like for the Family to have a soldier like Roy Batty at its disposal. He could not picture it. He shrugged to himself; in three months, anyway, they would all find out.

He glanced at the replicant woman, the one who was called both Ripley and Emma. Emma Ripley. She was impressive: tall, dark-haired, tough and obviously on the defense. What sort of things had those programmers put in her head? What sort of soldier was she going to make? She was sizing up demon-eyed Juke Bordello, her guard, with a calm, unfazed look. Suddenly she turned her head and stared at Gaff; he looked into dark brown eyes that glinted with that same otherness he'd encountered on the face of a rogue replicant in the alley outside Taffey Lewis' so long ago.

"You spring me and I'll run," she reminded him.

Gaff tilted back his Hubsch fedora and smiled an icy challenge at her. "You run and I'll shoot."

She took a couple of steps toward him. She tilted her head. "How do I know you're not lying to me? Pulling me into some trap for the police?"

Gaff nodded -- good, she was practical and cautious. "I always pay up on my deals," he told her. He stepped over to the low table, to the case that still sat atop it, and slid open the view-hatch.

"Jones," she whispered. She took a half-step toward the case.

"Welcome to the Family," Gaff said.

It paid to keep a bargain.

15.

The early afternoon sunlight had an astonishing sharpness to it, even through the thickly angled window of the small room of the infirmary, where Soledad sat on a bare mattress beside Lucinda Parmalee.

Soledad watched a swarm of small, insignificant shadows flutter in the light of the icecube-dense window. Leaves on a young tree outside, shaking in some wind.

Parmalee reached over, touched his forehead. "How are you feeling now? You look better."

Earlier it had been terrible -- confusion, rending pain. However, Doctor Guthry had arrived quickly at Mess/Rec, had immediately taken charge, had personally hustled Soledad -- with Parmalee stubbornly following -- to this small, quiet room in the lab wing of the infirmary for "examination". The examination had consisted of Guthry injecting something into Soledad's upper arm. Apparently it had been gauged correctly to his system; the pain had receded to a faint high-frequency buzz in his ears, a crawling sensation in the muscles of his shoulders and arms. If anything, even that was fading, and he was beginning to feel somewhat light-headed.

Parmalee stroked his forehead.

"It's all right," Soledad said.

She studied him. "What you told Guthry -- it was all true?"

"Yes."

Soledad had told the doctor about the incarceration at Dominguez, the mutiny, about Walkerman and, over all, the Voice. He'd omitted only his true name. Parmalee had been there all along, listening. At times he'd felt incoherent or sectioneight, trying to explain something like the Voice to outsiders . . . at times he'd had the feeling of talking in some cryptic, unreachable code.

Finally Guthry had left, saying he'd be back, leaving them here alone.

"The truth was mostly for you, you know," Soledad told Parmalee.

She pulled back. "How can you stand it?" Her voice shook. "Limited lifespan. Jesus."

She looked away, at the disused, dead-screened med-terminals huddled in one corner. Soledad sensed that her upset was not at himself. There'd been a cheated, frustrated note to her voice. It seemed poignantly familiar to Soledad -- anger at the elusive *Them*.

"You sound like someone I used to know," he said. "A replicant. She had too much of a sense of fair play. She expected everything else to be run according to some abstract rules. I never understood it."

Parmalee glanced back at him. It must have been something in his tone, because she seemed to know instantly: he'd been talking of *her*, the replicant lover Soledad had never named.

"What's it like?" she whispered.

"What?"

"The . . . the Voice."

"It's just a way of thinking."

"Does it make you closer? To one another?"

"Sometimes." He searched for some comparison. "But it's an automatic closeness, not something you can choose -- no more than a human can choose parents or brothers or sisters."

She made a bleak, uncertain smile. "Somehow it makes me feel . . . insufficient."

Soledad touched her hand. "Lucinda, the Voice is not magic. It can't furnish feelings that aren't there."

He wanted to reach out and touch her bright hair, and maybe communicate his longing without the lumpy stumbling-block of words. The impulse struck him as ironic, considering what he was trying to tell her.

"What did he mean," she whispered, "what did Walkerman mean when he said you were *sharing* it with me?"

"I don't know," Soledad said. "I honestly don't."

"I wish it were true. It would make things easier."

"But I'm glad it's not." Soledad smiled at her. "You are yourself. I prefer having to guess."

She reached up, touched his face.

"I want to be with you," she said.

Soledad heard the doubt in her voice, the ache. The sentence sounded unfinished to him, unfinished as in *I want to be with you . . . but*. As in: *But I want to have a home. But I want to stay in one place, belong to some place. But I want to have children.*

Certainly she had the right to a mate who wouldn't break down after an indeterminate time, like some cheapshop Shimata-make timeface. Or one who wouldn't, perhaps, cause her danger -- or death.

"Lucinda," he said softly, "I killed him. Shepherd. Walkerman."

She frowned, puzzled at the change in subject. "You said he was trying to kill you."

"Does that make it right?"

Parmalee's mouth firmed. "Soledad, he was playing the wrong game with you. He was playing Russian roulette and it backfired on him."

"I broke the rules. The only rules we had. I used the Voice in a forbidden way, and it killed him. I should have been able to save him."

"Save him? With your scintillating charisma, I suppose. Look, Willy, I used to know some vidheads and junkies a lot like him. Some of them *wanted* to self-destruct . . . and sometimes they wanted to take everyone with them." She touched his hand. "You have to live."

The door opened. Parmalee withdrew her hand from Soledad's. Doctor Guthry entered, shut the door quietly.

"The red tape has been hastily chopped." The doctor smoothed his wiry beard, studying Soledad with a dark up-and-down glance. "A demi-epileptic episode brought on by the emotion of et cetera, et cetera."

"It won't hold up for long," Parmalee said. "Things like that never do."

The doctor took off his glasses and rubbed the lenses with his lab jacket -- first one, then the other, with precision. His eyes were rimmed with tiredness. "True enough. You're a dangerous commodity, Johnson. You can't stay here, for your own sake."

Soledad nodded.

"However, I'm not saying you should just wander off into the wilderness and commune with the desert rats. I can give you a group of data to decide your direction by."

"Based on?"

"As I've said, I have a computer-mail link with my old colleagues at Tyrell, and I use it often. Communications have been escalated lately, in fact, because they wish me to haul myself out of exile and join them in -- a little business scheme. For your sake I've exploited this desire on their part, and gotten information out of them with shocking ease. Scientists can have big egos. And even bigger mouths."

"You are not playing with me?" Soledad said, low-voiced.

The doctor slid his glasses back on. "I'm not like my former colleagues. I don't believe in elaborate practical jokes." He reached into one pocket of his lab coat and extracted a sheet of papyrus, unfolded it, handed it to Soledad. "Tell me how you like this joke."

Soledad studied the sheet's message, in hasty dot-matrix printing:

PER YOUR INTEREST: BATTY CELL/PROGRAMME PACKAGE PROCURED VIA TRADE OF RIPLEY UNIT. PRODUCTION TO COMMENCE SHORTLY. INFLUENTIAL PROTECTION SECURED. YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN PROJECT URGENTLY NEEDED. -- NASH

Soledad glanced up at Guthry. Sharply: "What is this?"

"A voice from the past, as it were. How they love playing games with furtive messages, like conspirators in a game of 'Gotcha'." Guthry smiled wearily. "Due to the new legal ban on production of Nexus Sixes, several Tyrell Corporation biogeneticists are now planning a covert move with a very large crime syndicate -- *independent cooperative project*, they call it. I've been informed by this Nash that two units based on the same model are going to be produced in the near future, the first Nexus Sevens I suppose -- based on one of your group who died. Carrying on his cells, and virtually the same basic knowledge programme as the one you knew." Guthry hesitated; his dark, seamed face showed a sort of harsh concern, a tough sympathy. "Your leader."

Soledad stood up, walked over to the window. He watched the afternoon light waver over the thick glass. Briefly, he shut his eyes. *Roy Batty.* "What are they doing to him?"

"Batty's dead, Johnson -- the one you knew." Guthry's deep voice was gentle. "These others are to be like him. Nothing more."

"Of course," Soledad said softly. There was a pause. "What else?"

"As I said," Guthry continued, "this is in cooperation with a syndicate family, which procured the cells and programme illegally for the corporation; their reward will be one of the Batty-derived units, to use as a soldier. Tyrell Corporation is keeping the other unit."

"What for?"

"As an instrument in the continuation of their Nexus program, illegal now or not. Also . . ." The doctor paused, brooding. "Roy Batty was the one who killed Eldon Tyrell, you know."

"Good for him," Soledad said savagely.

"The corporate mind thinks strangely. This may be some sort of committee revenge on Batty, on the part of Replication labs." The doctor paused again. "The syndicate family gets a second reward, as well -- an additional soldier."

Soledad's stomach clenched. He did not like Guthry's hesitancy. "Who?"

"You see the mention of Ripley on that communiqué."

Soledad still felt light-headed from the drug Guthry had given him. Perhaps he was hallucinating this conversation. "That's impossible. She's dead. Electrocuted."

"Merely stunned. Tyrell Corp has been keeping her locked up all this time."

Soledad winced. Emma, a captive again. A slave again. And Batty -- no, not Batty, but beings *from* him. *I owe Emma and Batty my life. I owe them.* Soledad felt the tug of outrage, loyalty, fellow-feeling. *What are they doing to them?*

He saw Parmalee gazing at him. At what must be a look of pain on his face -- from the name Ripley.

"You knew Ripley, I think," Guthry said.

"Using them as soldiers, you said." Soledad preferred to clutch at objectivity. "What does that mean? What kind of soldiers?"

Suddenly, in a matter-of-fact tone, Parmalee put in: "The most powerful syndicate families own and run the city, along with the big corporations like Tyrell. The families keep power by their arsenals, the tricks they play on each other to try to scramble even higher, and by the numbers in their armies. Sometimes one soldier is used to assassinate one from a competing family; sometimes they're used for all-out street war."

Soledad glanced at her. "Did you . . . belong to them?"

"Hell, no." She shook her head. "Independent plasticking is rough, but it's better than getting mixed up with that Family stuff."

Emma Ripley, a killer for humans. Soledad wondered how anyone could get her cooperation in *that*. He thought of Roy Batty being reborn into the occupation he'd fought so hard to escape in a former life.

"One more thing." Guthry's voice had taken on a dry, ironic edge. "Shepherd -- your Walkerman -- was being grandiose and rather biblical when he told you his group of people were out in the 'wilderness'. There is a cell of about twenty-three Nexus Fives and Sixes in Los Angeles, all apparently of Mr. Walkerman's spiritual persuasion. They've been infiltrated by a Tyrell employee."

"Human?" Parmalee said.

The doctor raised a brow, seemingly surprised that she should even ask. "Of course not."

"You're interested in them." Soledad eyed Guthry carefully. Something about the doctor's tone -- "You're as interested as the corporation in them. I wonder why."

Guthry said nothing.

"Why are you telling me about them? Not just Ripley and Batty, but those other ones. You want me to go back there for some reason -- a reason of your own."

Parmalee darted a glance at Guthry.

"Look, Johnson," the doctor replied, "the situation that's developing back in L.A. is appalling. Complete chaos could come out of it. One syndicate family getting the upper hand over another could tip the balance, could lead to massive street wars. I think you'll understand that one family obtaining two Nexus Six soldiers could tip it all upside-down. Now what if, for some reason, Walkerman's group gets into the middle of it? Attracted to the power of the Nexus soldiers -- obligingly hunted up as more manpower by those soldiers -- it could certainly happen. And then perhaps Tyrell Corp, with interests in both the family and the group of rogues?"

"*Porco bleu,*" Parmalee whispered.

"I left the corporation because of what I saw as a misuse of my work toward unethical ends." Guthry looked sternly at the replicant. "This goes beyond that."

Soledad could visualize what Guthry had described. He was chilled at the idea of Ripley caught up in such a hideous trap -- Ripley and some walking memory of Roy Batty.

He owed them the greatest restraint and calm right now. "Why should I be interested in the misuse of your work?" Soledad allowed his voice to go low, cool. "You want my help. Get to the point."

The doctor's dark face creased with a hard smile. "You're thinking of your friends. You're toughing it." He dropped the smile. "I want us to cooperate to end that situation. You are an indispensable factor. You are the only one who can dislodge Ripley and, perhaps, the fledgling clones from their dangerous niches -- through persuasion, through the truth, through past comradeship. That would restore the syndicates' balance. You are also the only outsider replicant with enough experience to penetrate Walkerman's group and persuade them to disband. Perhaps Ripley can be of aid in this. Now, Lucinda here has told me of her plastic-forging experience, which will get you past a lot of problems."

"I see," Parmalee put in. "Lucinda will just go along and help too. But just how the hell is this supposed to look attractive to Lucinda?"

Guthry frowned. "Well. I assumed -- "

Parmalee got up from her seat on the bare mattress. She stared at Soledad. "I suppose you assumed, too?"

The replicant shook his head. "I think you'll be better off out if it. It would be fairer for you to stay here."

"I see." Her voice was low, even. "I'm glad to hear of it. Just start over, huh? While you go back there to that idiot city and get your brains blown out by the cops? Or the psychic equivalent of that, by some whacked-out replicants? It's just decided. I get no say in it. I see."

Guthry crossed his arms. "Lucinda, you must understand that in the majority of Sixes, there's at least an eighty percent likelihood that in emergencies they will place the concerns of the group over -- "

"Numbers. Don't quote numbers *merde* at me." The former Madisonite's street accent became more marked, and her voice -- if possible -- descended even lower and calmer. Her eyes trained on Soledad as evenly as though he were a target. "You mean something to me. I don't take that lightly, *liebling*. You who are so hot for your own rights, *ha ragione*? -- shouldn't I have a say in my life, too?"

"Yes." Soledad searched his knowledge for the term in kind -- "*Ha ragione*. You're right."

"Perhaps I should step out now." Guthry's deep voice was edgy. "This is between -- "

"Stay here, you're part of it," Parmalee replied. She aimed her gaze at Soledad again. "I've said I want to be with you. That doesn't mean I'm some fool to just tag along, cooing, 'Ooh, whatever you say, my hee-ro!'" Her voice rose in contempt -- then went almost to a whisper: "I've seen the hard times, I've seen human wreckage by the thousands, babies born deformed, and I've seen waste, waste. I won't waste myself by stepping into a vacuum again. I've done it before."

Soledad smiled at her. She deserved better -- with her courage, she deserved a future. But she also deserved the truth. "I need you with me, Lucinda."

She relaxed. Then, her gaze still intent, ignoring Guthry: "I have to know how I stand. Alongside — others who have the Voice. Others you know. Others you'll see again." She paused. "Memory's a powerful thing with you. It is with all of us. But how do I stand up next to the Voice?"

Soledad noticed that Guthry was still a scientist through and through -- watching this exchange now with fascination.

"Lucinda, the Voice is part of what I am. Other people of my kind are part of what I am, too -- almost part of my mind and skin at times. They always will be." Soledad hesitated, trying to summon up his need into words. "But there are other kinds of bonds outside the Voice -- I think maybe they're even more important. This is. If you don't want to come with me -- because out of loyalty I have to go -- I would think you'd be absolutely right. But there would be no future for me. Or if there were, I wouldn't care for one."

"Make us a future," she said. He voice was low, fierce, passionate. The light from the window made her hair bright, fiery red-gold, as the way he'd seen her in a Voice-vision on a train long ago.

*Make us a future.* Soledad grinned, with the same ferocity. After all this time, he had a bargaining lever, an advantage: *He was an indispensable factor.* He turned, faced the doctor. "It is possible to reverse the disease that kills us. Yes?"

"Yes." Guthry gave another hard, bearded smile. "It is. Despite what they'll tell you publicly -- it's been done."

"Can you do it here?"

"No. It takes vastly sophisticated -- "

"You will convince Tyrell Corporation to reverse it, then, for myself and the ones who come away with me. That is my only weapon against Walkerman's people, the promise of life. That is my price for going back to the city. That is my price for helping."

16.

Six days away from Trurow, the dirt road eastward dwindled down to a path, then to nothing. There was just the track of the intersecting railroad. They walked along the scrubby dirt and pea-gravel paths on either side of the old iron rails. Out here away from the agricultural station, the grass was longer, almost shoulder-high mostly, and the land was hillier. The air was dry, arid, and smelled of dust. The grass was yellow, and rustled in the slow breeze.

Soledad and Parmalee carried sleep-sacks, food, clothing and ID packed on their backs. It had been two days' walk along the TNE rail line until they'd come to the intersecting ANA line — the TNE line had carried them to Trurow from Los Angeles and "They'd look for you first on the TNE," Guthry had said, and drawn a diagram, a map for the alternate route.

Along the way, they often saw birds hovering over the plains. That morning they'd seen a group of small animals, things Soledad couldn't identify, hurtle by through the grass, long ears pressed back, a large bird dropping from the hazy sky in pursuit. It had missed its prey, rising up through the long grasses after a moment and flying off.

Guthry had agreed to Soledad's bargain quickly enough. He'd said he would be following soon, taking the TNE train in a couple of days, perhaps getting to Los Angeles before them. "It was getting dull here, anyway," he'd said, a smile twisting his dark face. Soledad could only guess at the man's feelings about dealing directly with Tyrell Corporation again. He wasn't even certain what circumstances had made Guthry leave his corporate masters in the first place. "If there's one thing I do not understand," Soledad had said to him before leaving, "It's your stake in all this. What do you care about street wars so far away? Why do you care about Tyrell Corporation any more?"

He'd received a hard, oblique glance from the scientist in return. "It's not the corporation I care for, Johnson. It's the Nexus program they're screwing over that I care for." He'd paused, looking at Soledad considerably, then: "We programmers . . . we had hopes. Some of us still do."

When the sun was high, Soledad and Parmalee reached a spot where the paths around the rails widened, and there was a rusty metal sign that read "TRAIN STOP", rocking in the dry breeze.

Soledad looked at Parmalee. "It'll stop here?"

She shaded her eyes and gazed at the spot. Her light skin had tanned slightly; it brought out the freckles on her face and arms. "Sure," she said, "I guess this is the place."

"You want to wait here or go on?" he said.

Parmalee smiled at him. "I dunno. I like going like this."

"It is good. But let's be here for the train."

They set down their packs, saying nothing. They settled down, and pulled out food and ate in silence. Soledad found that he liked the sounds of the wind rustling through the grasses, the occasional cry from a far-off bird, the sight of Lucinda Parmalee leaning back against her pack and sleep-sack and staring up at the clouds in the sky.

Night fell, and for a while the only thing was darkness and the wind soughing through the grasses, and the stars above.

They shared a sleep-sack and made love. The sack was not roomy. "Ow. Over here." Awkward maneuvers, and soft laughter.

Long after Parmalee went to sleep, Soledad gazed up into the sky. The stars were incredibly bright and cold-seeming. Almost the way they had looked from Offworld, the various places from which he'd watched them. Shimata. Dominguez.

Would he find Ripley again? What would she have found at Tyrell Corporation? Madness, perhaps; or a deepening of her own steadiness, that quality that he owed so much to from the past. What about Batty -- no, the two derived from him. Phantoms of sort, or children? Odd, almost funny, to think of a replicant's *children*.

Soledad smiled. He kissed Parmalee's neck, and she stirred, murmuring.

Despite the Voice, Soledad reflected, he had not ever really understood Roy Batty. The man who had led them out of Dominguez had remained, in his memory, an almost abstract figure, a dark cipher of fierce tenacity. "*In this battle, there is no giving up . . .*" But Soledad would always have that debt to him, even to the inheritors of his cells and his Voice -- a debt to that mysterious impulse that had led Batty to negate his brother replicant's files. Perhaps the Voice had led him to it. Had he known what Soledad would go on to live through? Had he imagined it? Had he realized that Soledad would be the one to survive, to eventually come back to Los Angeles then . . . to pry the promise of life from their makers?

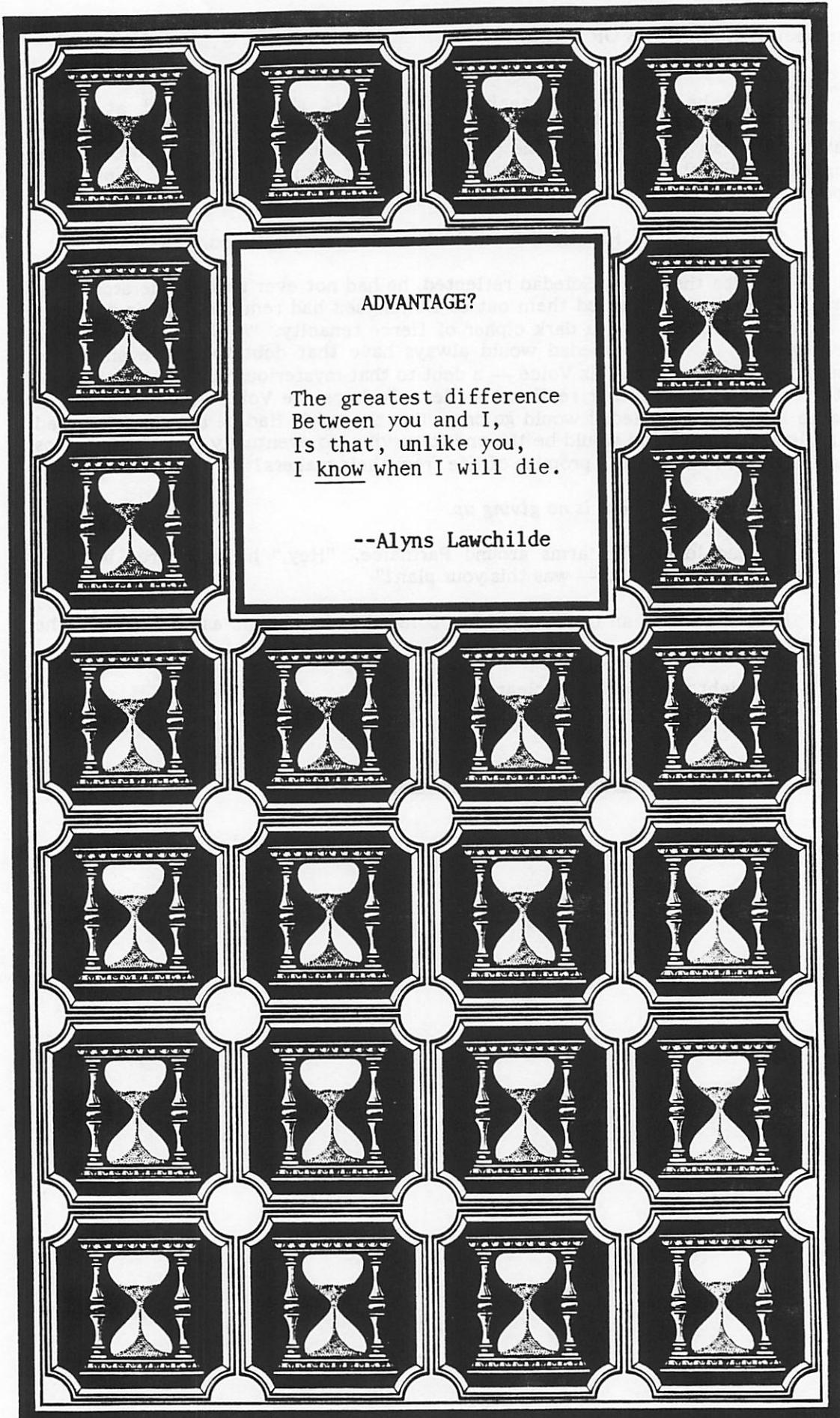
*In this battle, there is no giving up.*

Soledad locked his arms around Parmalee. "Hey," he murmured into the darkness. "Hey, Roy Batty -- was this your plan?"

It seemed such an ironic idea that Soledad had to laugh, as he looked at the black starry sky.

The night wore on into a clear dawn.

ADVANTAGE?

The greatest difference  
Between you and I,  
Is that, unlike you,  
I know when I will die.

--Alyns Lawchilde

法國西班牙爭錦標

# sentry

patricia j.d. kyle

The little soldier waited. His tiny artificially rouged cheek twitched. He had been waiting for quite a long time.

The ersatz martinet marched over to the door and peered out. No one was coming. He had forgotten how many times he had looked for someone to arrive. He had stopped expecting anyone to really come anymore. The looking was now only a remnant of past programming.

Long ago, someone had come. It was after the visitors his master had entertained had had their programming violently disrupted. His companion had been "alive" then. A crew had come to clean away the mess that had been the female. His companion and he had heard the voices in the hallway. They had waddled out on the possibility of it being their master finally come home. The child-size constructs had greeted the humans with the ritual words.

Then the chase was on.

The startled workers first were delighted with the soldier and his companion. Then they had decided to take possession of them, and whatever else lay unclaimed in the apartment. The two had defended their home furiously against the intruders, but when it became clear that they were outnumbered and undone, they had fled to their hiding places. His companion had been found. The fearful martinet cowered under and among other toys when he heard his companion's capture. The other had died amid an agony of squeaks and sparks, and then a, "Shit, Gus, you broke the damn thing," from one of the crew.

J.F. Sebastian's toy soldier sighed, a sound that shivered through his organimech body. The memory disturbed his limited programming. He marched over to where his harmonica lay and played its soothing tones, remembering that it had also seemed to soothe his long-missing master.

When he was finished he set the instrument aside, and went in search of his miniature rifle. He found it and went to the first point of his sentinel's position.

He looked around the room. Dust lay everywhere, and ruin, where other marauders had made their way into J.F.'s apartment and domain. Soldier had hidden from them lest he suffer his companion's fate.

The evening light was fading, casting gloomy darkness, like a blanket, over everything. Soldier wondered if he ever dare venture to the outside world, for he knew more existed than just this room. There was the hallway and another landing, at the least.

J.F.'s sentry pushed the gun up on his shoulder and the thought out of his mind. Soldier had his duty. He had to guard J.F.'s domain in his master's absence. And he had to wait for J.F.'s return.

He would wait forever if he had to.



"childhood end -- deckard"

i remember, once, i was a child -- surely once i was  
something innocent, dirty feet running  
on green grass wet with rain  
running into sunrise or sunset, into the air --  
bladerunner even then, knowing  
the grass will cut your feet if you slide  
on the edge --  
i remember my mother's voice calling me in --  
why do my memories make me human?  
i see pictures behind the glass  
of my eyes, watching the pictures on the piano  
played by fingers never taught -- are our pictures here real?  
  
together we stand in the sun, in the fine sweet rain --  
i remember nuestra senora la reina de los angeles  
the air smelt of rain, the rain of suffocation  
the unquiet rain where the malformed children played --  
i remember  
my wife left me because we had no children -- my choice  
no dirty feet in los angeles where nothing grows  
green grass in the mountains and two babes in the woods --  
babyless not my choice but  
no choice to be made when i cannot comfort her, when i  
lie silent pretending i do not hear her  
bare feet in wet grass  
with tears --  
rachael weeping for her children because they are not  
o god and never can be --

--Deborah June Laymon

"A Gory Story" / Roberta Rogow

(To the tune of "Johnny's So Long at the Fair")

The cops got a guy by name of Rick Deckard,  
At hunting down skinjobs he had a great record,  
His heart it was cold, and his past it was checkered,  
And nobody knew he was there.

CHORUS:

*Oh, dear, what can the matter be,  
Replicants infiltrate society,  
They fit in without notoriety,  
Nobody knew they were there.*

The first that he got was a lady named Zhora,  
Who danced with a snake so the men would adore her,  
He blew her away through the front of a store . . .  
And nobody knew she was there.

The next one was Leon, a replicant dummy,  
Who got blown away in the pit of the tummy,  
He lay there and bled, and he did not look yummy,  
And nobody knew he was there.

The next was a lissome young lassie named Pris,  
Who jumped on his back and gave Rick's head a twist,  
He blew here away with the flick of a wrist,  
And nobody knew she was there.

The last was the leader, a guy named Roy Batty,  
A gorgeous physique, but not built to be chatty,  
He told Deckard all of his secrets so that he  
Would tell everyone he'd been there.

So Deckard got out of the city real quick,  
And took Rachael with him, before she got sick . . .  
You want to know more? Go read Phil K. Dick,  
And no one will know you are there!

## CONTRIBUTORS

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In mundane life an advertising copywriter, fannishly she has written and published in a number of media universes, including STAR WARS, BLADERUNNER, REMINGTON STEELE, and BLAKE'S SEVEN. She published the SW zines JUNDLAND WASTES, ALDERAANI IMPERATIVE, COLLECTED CIRCLE OF FIRE, and THE COMPLEAT ZEEK. She is currently working on a B7 novel in collaboration with Jacqueline Taero called RUMORS OF LIFE and publishing a bi-monthly B7 zine called PRESSURE POINT.

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I've currently changed my mundane name and address to reflect my newly-married status. I now reside in that bastion of cows and state fairs, Columbus, Ohio, with husband Kenneth, who is also a fan. I'm currently working only three (!?) jobs. I'm secretary to the director of the Ohio State University Slavic Center, singing in the cast of Opera Columbus, and a soloist at a local church. I've been illustrating for fannish literature since STAR TREK began in the mid-sixties.

My work has appeared in ST, STAR WARS, MAN FROM UNCLE, Harrison Ford zines, Western zines, and whatever else catches my interest. In addition to the US fanzines, I've also been published in Germany and Australia. I occasionally dabble in articles and poetry in addition to fannish art. Fanzines publishing my works have included WARPED SPACE, SKYWALKER, GUARDIAN, TIME WARP, FACETS, FLIP OF A COIN, GHOST RIDERS, SHADOWSTAR, SCOUNDREL, FORTUNE AND GLORY, and PEGASUS. Other hobbies and interests include SCA, costuming, cats, knitting, THE NEW AVENGERS, and LADYHAWKE.

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Anne Elizabeth Zeek has been active in fandom since STAR TREK, and for many years published the fanzine TIME WARP, which has won Fan-Q for Best Zine. Her writing has also won the Fan-Q six times, and she has written in a number of universes, including STAR TREK, STAR WARS, REMINGTON STEELE, INDIANA JONES, BLADERUNNER, and LADYHAWKE. She is currently working on a mainstream novel.

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I do not have a current address for Alyns Lawchilde, last living in Texas, nor do I have permission to print her real name. If anyone knows where she is, please have her contact me so I can send her her contributor's copy.

# Flip Of A Coin 11

FLIP 11 is ready! Ready and waiting to take you through 314 pages of exciting adventures with many of Harrison Ford's memorable characters. Selections include:

LETHAL WITNESS by Cypher; illustrated by Dani. John Book is less than overjoyed to be saddled with a new partner--a psychotic, suicidal Los Angeles cop named Martin Riggs. The first time he saves Riggs' life, Riggs slugs him. Next Riggs goes after a woman in whom Book is interested. They snip, feud and fight...and then things start getting nasty.

CURTAIN CALL by L. A. Adolf; illustrated by Yvonne Zan. Obi-Wan finds returning from the grave more of an adventure than he bargained for; and Han Solo finds that even Rebel heroes can't "get no respect." A less than reverent pre-ROTJ look at "other hopes."

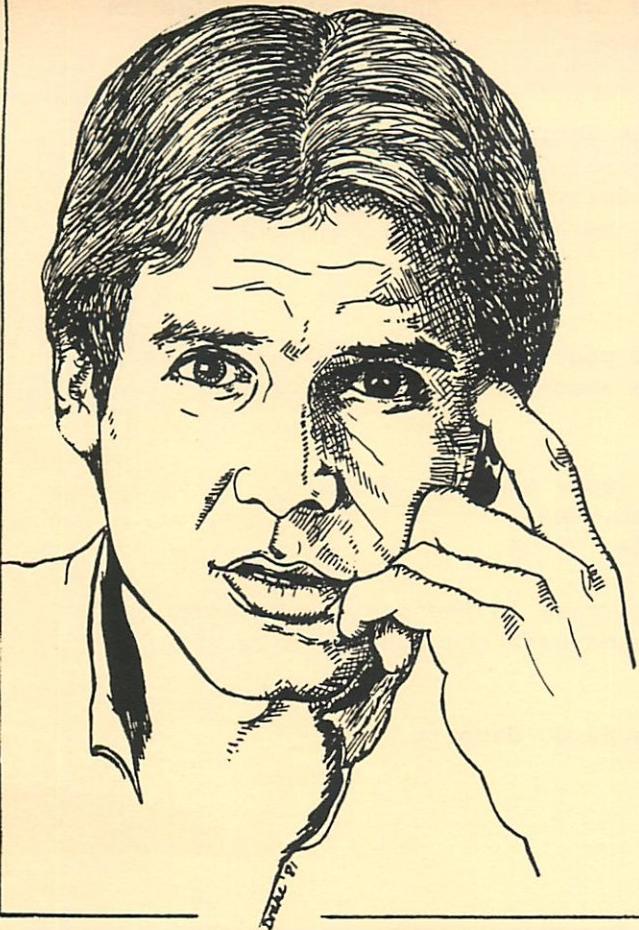
SINGAPORE SLING by Barbara Anderson; illustrated by Jim Markle. His original objective was the last remains of Nurhachi, but a prophetic encounter in Singapore with the beautiful Dragon Lady leads Indiana to his first and almost last adventure with Wu Han as ancient Oriental terror is set loose upon the earth.

FIRST LESSON by Marcia Brin; illustrated by Dani. Mistreated and abandoned by the Rhom, a very young Han Solo learns to trust the Wookiees who raise him as one of their own.

ANGEL OF MERCY by Jean Marie Dewey; illustrated by Rebecca Carey. Indy and Marion survive the Wrath of God only to meet the Guardian of the Ark.

A TOMMY TALE, Part 1, by Wanda Lybarger; illustrated by Lybarger and Martynn. It wasn't so much that she was a stray; Tommy Lillard was sort of getting used to collecting them. What he hadn't bargained for were vendettas, a husband, murder...and love.

CONFRONTATION by Elaine Christiani; illustrated by Rebecca Carey. As Vader's "dinner guests," Han, Leia and Chewie realize the helpless position Lando has placed them in because of his deal with the Empire.



## Harrison Ford Fans!

TO SLEEP! PERCHANCE TO DREAM by Michelle Worley; illustrated by Cherie Fontyn. A young woman finds an other-worldly friend in an unlikely place, and a face from the past lights up the present.

THE DEBT by Sally A. Syrjala; illustrated by Dani. Free of the carbonite, Han has time to ponder promises kept and his love for Leia.

BILL OF FARE by Elaine Christiani; illustrated by Dani. The charms of Pankot Palace have worn thin for Willie Scott with the arrival of chilled monkey brains.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE JUMP by Beth C. Masterson; illustrated by Jim Markle. Han recalls someone else he cared for as he watches over a battered Luke Skywalker while waiting for rescue on Hoth.

WINTER DREAMS by Tracy Taylor; illustrated by Judy Low. Leia's peaceful dream of her past and her future life with Han on Alderaan is painfully interrupted as she awakens aboard the Rebel cruiser following the events on Cloud City.

EVENING ON THE WIND by Elaine Christiani; illustrated by Julie B. Jones. On the deck of the Bantu Wind, Marion reflects on her past with Indy...and the possibilities for the future.

SAVE US FROM PRINCESSES by Ruth Radecki; illustrated by Dani. Han Solo has never been big on babysitting, especially when the sittee is a royal teenager who thinks the Corellian is pretty neat. He's still not big on babysitting...or royalty.

GOLD by Martie O'Brien; illustrated by Wanda Lybarger. An exciting collection of lyrics dedicated to Allie Fox and his vision.

This issue also includes poetry by Jacqueline Taero, Cypher, Elaine Christiani, Tonya Cox, Beth Lentz, Marci Erwin, Jill Thomas, Christine Haire, and Susan Zahn; additional art by Jim Markle, Rebecca Carey, Sheila Paulson, Dianne Smith, and Lisa Brown; more filks by Debra Edwards and Jeanna Falk; and cartoons by Yvonne Zan and Cherie Fontyn.

The price is \$14.75, plus \$2.50\* first class postage. Please make check or money order payable to FLIP OF A COIN in the amount of \$17.25 and mail to:

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